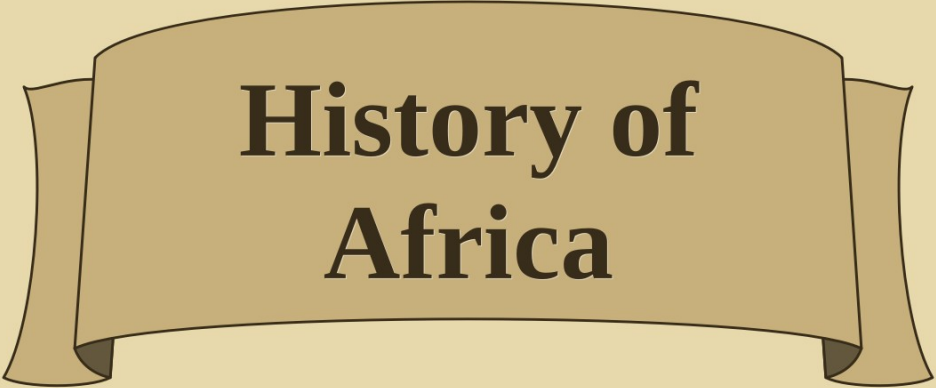




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Kevin Shillington

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HISTORY OF AFRIC A

Fourth Edition

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*For the history students of the University of Botswana who inspired the first
edition*

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Preface

The purpose of this *History of Africa*, now in its fourth revised edition, is to provide a clear, basic and well-illustrated introduction to Africa's long and fascinating past, which is easily understood by the non-specialist general reader or student and based on the results of some of the most recent and up-to-date research. The book pays particular attention to social, economic, political and religious developments and the way in which these affect the lives of ordinary people. At the same time, I have sought to provide a critical but chronological narrative that covers most of the major developments and societies on the continent and touches on many of the themes that have most concerned historians in recent decades.

Starting from the earliest evolution of humankind, the book traces the history of Africa through the millennia of the Stone Age to the rise and decline of the states and societies of Africa in the ancient and medieval worlds. Through the more recent centuries of increasing European intervention, the focus has remained on the indigenous African viewpoints, developments and initiatives. Finally, I have attempted to place the postcolonial problems of political, social and economic development in their proper historical context and so avoid the strongly negative tone of so much modern writing about contemporary Africa.

A number of important changes have been made to this fourth edition. Some of these changes have been based on advice received by the publishers, Palgrave, from academics who have used, or considered using, this textbook as a teaching tool for students in North America, the United Kingdom and South Africa. I am extremely grateful to those historians and teachers who took the time to offer advice on ways to improve the previous editions and who have commented on my proposed changes to the current edition. I have borne in mind their words of wisdom and have incorporated as many of their suggestions as I have considered practicable in a work of this scope. Many of these historians expressed a desire for greater coverage of historiographical debates, the complexity of historical interpretation and the point that history is so much more than a

simple narrative of events. So as not to overburden the clarity of the text, which I believe has been one of its strengths, these issues are included in the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e, which has undergone some revision and improvement since the previous edition.

This fourth edition is presented in a new format to reflect the strength of changes in presentation and content. Throughout the book, the chapters have been grouped into eleven thematic sections. It is hoped that this will help clarify and add focus to the study of African history as presented in this volume. Each section starts with an Introduction that explains the theme(s) to be found in the chapters that follow. While Section 7, The Nineteenth Century before the European 'Scramble for Africa', contains six chapters, all other sections contain just two or three chapters. A number of chapters (and their subsections) have been moved and some new ones created to better reflect these themes.

As in previous editions, I have made small revisions, clarifications and additions throughout the book to reflect the findings of recent research and publications. But I have also expanded, extensively revised or completely rewritten coverage in the following areas. The geographical component of the Introduction has been rewritten in order to more clearly link environment and human history. Within Section 1, the treatment of human evolution has inevitably been revised and updated to reflect the ever-widening knowledge of this fascinating topic, while the coverage of Ancient Egypt and Nubia has been completely rewritten so as to present a more logical, chronological view of those ancient times and developments. Within Section 2, Aksum has been brought forward into the early Iron Age and the treatment of the Bantu dispersal has been revised and updated. In subsequent sections, other chapters have been rejigged to better reflect the chosen themes, and more has been made of the issue of evidence for the transatlantic slave trade through the autobiography of Gustavus Vassa. State formation in southern Africa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been considerably rewritten, while the abolition of the slave trade has been expanded and given its own chapter, Chapter 17. Finally, while the three chapters of Section 10, The Overthrow of Colonialism, remain largely unchanged, Chapters 30 and 31 have been expanded and Chapter 32, Contemporary Africa, has been completely rewritten to reflect the theme of Section 11, Africa since Independence.

The aforementioned companion website has been updated with numerous revisions and some exciting new resources, including test bank and timelines, and the web material is more integrated with the

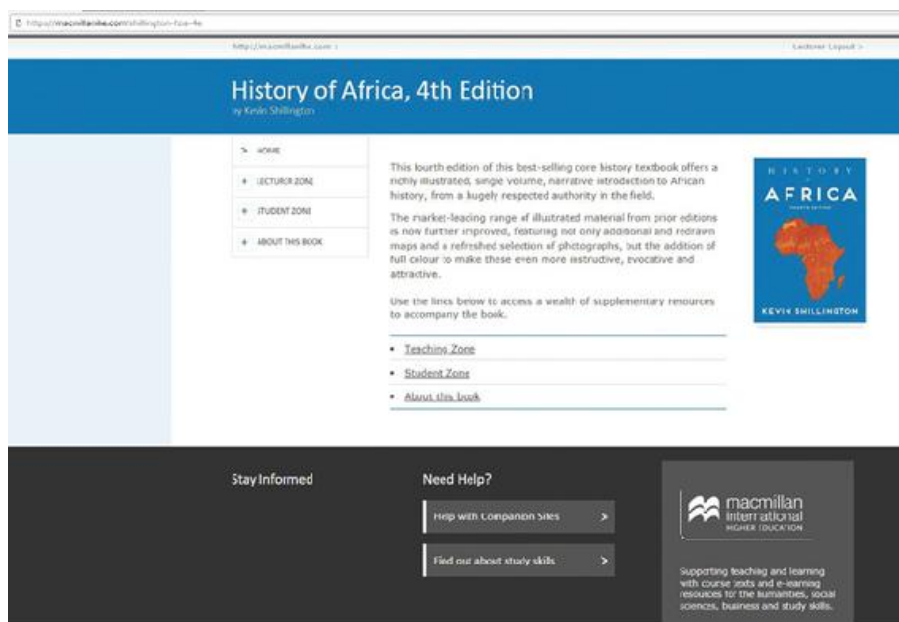
text. The website contains digital copies of all the specially drawn historical maps that appear in the book. Thus, these will be available for comparative work across period and regions, and exercises have been designed to promote these possibilities. At certain strategic points, text boxes refer the reader to further related information on the topic or to deeper discussion of historiographical developments, debates or controversies on the website. The book thus relates the history of Africa in companionship with the website, which will not only help the student to understand and so learn the history, but will also lead the reader through the process of historical construction. One thing I hope any student will learn from this book and its website is that nothing in history is definitive: it is all subject to interpretation.

My debt to fellow historians of Africa is, as ever, enormous and ongoing – their works are referenced in the Suggestions for further reading at the end of the book and chapter by chapter on the website. I have read widely of their work and only hope that my interpretation does some justice to their efforts. My thanks are due to Jon Peacock and his team at Palgrave for their deep commitment and enthusiasm for the project, including Sophiya Ali for her work on the illustrations, many of which are new to this edition of *History of Africa*. Finally, as ever, I dedicate this book to Pippa without whose unstinting encouragement and support I could never have undertaken yet another edition.

Kevin Shillington
Dorset
April 2018

About the Website

Visit the book's companion website at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e for extra resources to support and enhance your teaching and learning:



For Students:

- Interactive Timelines
- ‘Debates in African History’ and ‘Additional Material’ features

For Lecturers:

- PowerPoint slides for each chapter
- A full Testbank of assessment questions
- longer Essay Questions for each chapter

Introduction

Before we begin this particular history of the African continent, it is useful to understand how the recording of Africa's history – its 'historiography' – has developed. It is also beneficial to gain an appreciation of the climate and environment of Africa and the way this has impacted on its history.

Historiography

The writing of Africa's history has taken many forms over the centuries. The Ancient Egyptians, who invented one of the world's oldest scripts, hieroglyphics, recorded their history on papyrus scrolls, on the walls of temples and tombs, and carved into solid pillars of rock. They certainly wanted people of the future to know about their history, even if it was often little more than lists of kings and fantastic stories of the military prowess of their rulers. The Nubian kingdoms of Sudan were literate from a similar age. Their successor Kingdom of Meroe kept literate records from at least the sixth century BCE (Before the Common Era), although their script has not yet been deciphered. Ancestral Ethiopians too were literate from the fifth century BCE, and from at least the ninth century CE (Common Era), Ethiopians recorded aspects of their history in religious and regal texts and in works of literature. The most prominent recorders of Africa's history from the ninth to sixteenth century CE were Arabic-speaking north African scholars. They wrote both the history of their own societies and that of the peoples of *al-Sudan* (the 'land of the black people') south of the Sahara, whom they had heard about through trading contacts or had visited themselves. But it was not only outsiders who wrote the history of al-Sudan. In the seventeenth century, a local Muslim scholar of Timbuktu, named Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di, chronicled the history of the Songhay Empire in the *Ta'rikh al-Sudan*. Similarly, in the trading cities of the east African coast, local Swahili-speaking scholars recorded some of their history, writing Swahili in Arabic script. Much

of these early forms of African history were heavily dependent on the local oral traditions of the time. Today, they form the basis of much of our understanding of those distant times.

Meanwhile, in the preliterate societies of much of sub-Saharan Africa, people had their own way of recording and interpreting their history, passing it from one generation to the next through the recitation of oral tradition. Some of this, such as the *Sunjata* epic (see Chapter 7), took the form of performance art that persists to this day. As with the early written records of Ancient Egypt and elsewhere, the focus of these oral traditions tended to be on the ancestry of rulers, their prowess and heroic exploits.

The modern discipline of history, based on the strict rules of evidence and the principles of interpretation, only began to be developed in Europe from the late eighteenth century. There they had an abundance of written records dealing with all aspects of life, especially the affairs of government. And the kind of history that this emerging class of historians wrote assumed the primacy of official written records. Indeed, the prevalent belief among nineteenth-century European historians was that without written records there was no history. They applied this principle to Africa during the period of colonisation from the late nineteenth century and concluded that Africa south of the Sahara had little or no history of significance before the coming of the Europeans. This coincided with their views of racial superiority, which they used to justify their colonial conquests. These racist prejudices seriously impeded the study and writing of African history for at least the next half-century.

In spite of this atmosphere of European dominance, a small number of Western-educated Africans wrote some important works of history in this turbulent conquest period, using a combination of oral tradition and written record, for example Carl Christian Reindorf's *A History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (1895), Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1897) and Apollo Kaggwa's *The Kings of Buganda* (1901).

With the awakening of African nationalism after the Second World War, there was a great resurgence in the study and writing of African history. Centres of African studies were set up in European universities, and new university colleges were established in east and west Africa. Together, African historians and their counterparts in Europe produced pioneering works on precolonial African history. A particularly important work of methodology in this period was Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History* (1961), which showed how oral tradition could be effectively utilised as a valid resource by the modern professional historian. By the mid-1960s, the lead in the study

of African history outside Africa was being taken up by American universities, with an increasing number of African graduate students taking their PhDs in the United States.

The ultimate inspiration for much of this 'Africanist' historiography of the independence period was twofold. First, it was to prove that Africa had a history at least the equal of that of Europe. This inevitably led to a focus on the great states and empires of the past at the expense of smaller societies that tended to be dismissed as 'stateless'. Second, there was a desire to produce 'national' histories to fit the new nation-states that were gaining their independence in the 1950s and 60s. Part of the purpose of these 'national histories' was to reinforce the idea that the peoples within the new colonially created boundaries had a common history. It was often a rather contrived exercise.

By the 1970s, the euphoria of independence had begun to give way to disillusionment. The new political élites had followed European models of development that had clearly failed to deliver, at which point a Marxist school of history began to emerge. This saw African society in terms of class struggle and argued that Africa's problems stemmed from the exploitation of the capitalist system that had been forced on Africa by colonialism. Indeed, Walter Rodney's highly influential *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) argued that the roots of Africa's current problems of underdevelopment could be traced back to the slave trade, on which Europe's industrial development was ultimately based. Rodney, a scholar from Guyana, was teaching at the University of Dar es-Salaam at the time, and his book was intended, to some extent, to provide the historical rationale for President Nyerere's attempt to establish socialism in Tanzania (see Chapter 30). Although many historians of Africa did not subscribe to Rodney's radical view, his work and that of others in this period turned the focus away from that of great empires of the past and on to the history of common people: peasants, migrant workers, domestic servants. Their 'heroic' struggles within the capitalist system, principally during the colonial period, had clear implications for the unresolved problems of the postcolonial present.

Since the collapse of the communist Soviet Union in 1991 and the consequent undermining of Marxist theory, historians of Africa have felt freer to study a wide range of social, economic and political issues, from the role of gender in African history to that of religion and ethnicity. Behind this movement has been a desire to better understand the problems in the Africa of the present. The focus on contemporary relevance, however, has meant that the study of Africa's precolonial past has been more or less abandoned. Perhaps it is

considered too distant to be of relevance, or even that it ‘has been done’. Either of these views shows a lack of understanding of the potential of history. Indeed, they should provide the historian with a challenge.

One school of African historical writing, particularly prevalent in North America, is known as Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity. To some extent, this is a reaction to the Eurocentric intellectual ideas that drove the Marxist class analysis of African history in the 1970s and 80s. The inspiration for Afrocentrism has been the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop, whose work was originally published in French in 1954 and then republished in English in 1974 as *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* Diop argued that Ancient Egypt was a black African civilisation on which the civilisations of Greece, Rome and ultimately modern Europe were built. Diop certainly drew attention to the Africanness of the Ancient Egyptians, which subsequent research by others has largely borne out. But Diop went on to argue that all civilisations in Africa stemmed from that of Ancient Egypt, which implied that Africans elsewhere were not able to develop their own distinctive civilisations without external influence. As a school of history, however, in recent decades Afrocentrism has developed beyond the limitations of Diop’s interpretations and feeds into current movements for black empowerment, whether that be among African-Americans in North America, or as a reaction to the postcolonial distortions of a nation such as South Africa.

As the present book is a general introductory survey of the whole sweep of African history from ancient times to the present, it draws to some extent on all these approaches to the discipline. It can thus, for instance, be found within both the Africanist precolonial tradition as well as utilising elements of a Marxist critique and post-Marxist traditions in its analysis of modern African history.

Climate and environment in the history of Africa

The way that the globe is flattened out into the maps of a modern atlas tends to exaggerate the size of the northern hemisphere and disguise the true scale of Africa, which straddles the centre of the globe. Africa is, in fact, the second largest continent, second only to Asia in size and far larger than the whole of North America. It is the only continent that encompasses both the northern and southern tropics, which are found 23 degrees of latitude north and south of the Equator. These are the northernmost and southernmost points at

which the sun is overhead in the summer months. The (northern) Tropic of Cancer passes through the middle of the Sahara, while the (southern) Tropic of Capricorn passes through the Namibian and Kalahari deserts, some 1,200 kilometres north of the Cape of Good Hope. Africa thus experiences a huge range of climate between the temperate Mediterranean zone along the northern coastline to its equivalent at the Cape in the south.

Africa has experienced much climate change since early human evolution several million years ago (Chapter 1). This has been especially significant since the evolution of modern humans about 300,000 years ago. The present climatic pattern of Africa, although currently undergoing measurable change (see Chapter 32), has existed for about the past 5,000 years, and the following brief survey of Africa's climate and environment is based on this current pattern.

Mediterranean north Africa experiences winter rainfall and thus in terms of agriculture along the western coastal plains, north Africans have been able to grow temperate crops, such as wheat, barley and fruit, including vines and olives. Because of its agricultural potential, the region has historically held higher levels of population than its eastern neighbour Libya. Eastern north Africa has a drier climate than the west and so historically has been more suited to pastoralism than arable crops. And then there is Egypt, which receives almost no rainfall at all. For many millennia Egypt has naturally been a sandy desert; but for one thing: the waters of Africa's greatest river, the Nile. As we shall see in Chapter 2, although historic Egypt lies to the north of the Tropic of Cancer, it benefits from the tropical summer rainfall of east Africa, especially the Ethiopian highlands, which is brought down to Egypt in the form of the annual inundation of the Nile valley floodplain. The Nile has figuratively been the 'lifeblood' of Egypt, enabling it to become preindustrial Africa's most populous country, being overtaken in the past century only by Nigeria.

South of Mediterranean north Africa, the northern third of the continent is dominated by the world's largest desert, the Sahara, which straddles the Tropic of Cancer. It was not always a desert (Chapter 2), but all that has remained habitable in recent millennia has been isolated oases, home to date palms, salt mines and very hardy desert dwellers. Even at its driest, however, the Sahara has never been a barrier to human traffic. Indeed, historically, it has been a major trade route, envisaged by north African merchants as an ocean, navigable by skilled travellers, especially with the assistance of the camel. And trans-Saharan trade has been a powerful source of wealth and impetus to state formation, both north and south of the desert.

In west Africa, bordering the Sahara, a belt of dry grassland steppe, known as the Sahel, is suitable only for pastoralism and trans-Saharan trading settlements. West Africa's first major trading empire, Ghana (Chapter 6), fell within this zone. Further south there is more summer rainfall and the Sahel gradually gives way to woodland savannah, which offers the potential for mixed farming and pastoralism. This transitional zone between Sahel and tropical forest has provided the greatest and most varied environmental opportunities for human settlement and it is no coincidence that this has been a region of historically significant population levels and technical advances. Rivers too have provided historically important opportunities for west African human development, especially the Niger, which rises in the highlands of Guinea in the southwest of the region. Significantly, it flows northeast, away from the coast and towards the desert. On its way through the savannah, the river divides into a swampy 'inland delta' that was an important centre of early agricultural settlement and innovation and went on to become the heartland of a great medieval empire (Chapters 3 and 7). The Niger turns east as it approaches the Sahel, providing a great bend of flowing fresh water in the otherwise dry steppe, so important for pastoralism and for fishing. The river is also navigable here and has historically been a vital transport route for trade and communication. After the 'great bend' of the middle Niger, the river turns southeast to flow through cataracts towards the forested zone of southern Nigeria. Here it divides into a great delta that has pushed out into the Gulf of Guinea to form multiple inland waterways within the fertile forest, providing great opportunities for the development of specialised small-scale societies (Chapters 6 and 12). Major rivers such as the Niger and the Senegal in the far west of the region have always attracted human settlement along their banks and have been important highways for trade and, sometimes, political power.

The equatorial zone, about 8 degrees of latitude north and south of the Equator, experiences an overhead sun twice a year, in March and September. It is in these hottest times of year that the greatest amount of water is evaporated from the oceans. Ocean currents and prevailing winds bring this moisture to the land as heavy rainfall, twice a year. In the low-lying zones of coastal west Africa this has enabled the development of rainforest vegetation. In recent centuries, it has been a major region for the cultivation of the African oil palm.

Central Africa is dominated by the equatorial rainforest of the Congo Basin (see Map 0.1). Here, historically, human activity was mostly based on hunting, gathering and fishing (Chapter 14). In the preindustrial centuries before the advent of modern timber-felling

techniques, there were multiple natural clearings in the forest, which farmers were able to utilise and expand. And with plentiful rainfall, quite dense settlements were possible. On the fringes of the forest, this allowed technical developments and state formation. This applied particularly on the plateau land of the southern fringes of the forest.

To the east of the Congo basin, the land rises sharply to the Ruwenzori Mountains and the highland plateau of east Africa. Here, despite being in the equatorial zone, the coolness of the high plateau prevents the growth of rainforest vegetation. Instead, the favourable climate has enabled a wide range of agricultural and pastoral activities to be developed. This, in turn, has attracted immigration, leading to a great complexity of cultures (Chapters 4, 8 and 14). To the north of the east African plateau, the highlands of Ethiopia, with its deep valleys and fertile soils, combined with proximity to the trading opportunities and cultural interchange of the Red Sea, enabled the development of a complex kingdom of great antiquity (Chapters 3 and 8). This combination of trading opportunities and cultural interchange was applicable also along the east African coast, from southern Somalia to Mozambique and northern Madagascar, where the thriving hybrid Swahili trading culture evolved.

The vegetation of modern Africa



To the immediate south of the Congo forest borderlands, a woodland and grassland savannah plateau stretches as far as the Drakensberg mountain range in the southeast of modern South Africa. Here, preindustrial African farmers were able to adapt their mixed agricultural and herding activities within the confines of the seasonal summer rainfall of the southern solstice. The region was rich in iron ore and other minerals; but besides these, until the nineteenth-century colonial intrusion, cattle-keeping had become a dominant source of wealth and political power in the more southerly regions. The prevailing winds of southern Africa carry the seasonal rainfall westwards from the southern Indian Ocean. And as the rain is dropped in the eastern districts, the level of rainfall steadily declines westward, until the Kalahari, which receives very little rainfall. The Kalahari is not a sand desert, but a dry grassland steppe with *Acacia* thorn scrub,

similar to the Sahelian region bordering the Sahara, and thus historically suitable for hunting and seasonal summer grazing.

The Namib sand desert to the west of the Kalahari is a product of cold south Atlantic currents and offshore winds that divert moist air away from the Namibian coastline, while in the far southwest of the continent, winter rainfall predominates. Here, the climate is more similar to that of the Mediterranean zone of the north. Until the colonial intrusion of the seventeenth century, it had been a region rich in seasonal pastoralism and hunting. Since the colonial seizure of indigenous land, however, imported European farming techniques have turned it into a major producer of temperate fruits and wine.



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SECTION 1



EARLY AND LATER PREHISTORY



Chapters 1 and 2 trace the very beginning of the human story in Africa, from evolutionary origins, through the long millennia of hunting and gathering to the development of farming and pastoralism. This very ancient period is usually referred to as ‘prehistory’ – a time before identifiable individuals or communities become apparent. The term ‘prehistoric’ is often used today to imply

that something is primitive, backward or out of date. The implication is that nothing can usefully be learned from the prehistoric; that this was an unimportant, timeless period in which little of significance happened. But nothing could be further from the truth. The people of prehistory had to deal with major themes that have particular relevance to the world today – climate and environmental change, migration, egalitarianism versus sharp divisions of wealth, the political and economic organisation of society and the use and abuse of power. As such, they have much to teach us.

Compared with us today, all that these people lacked was our accumulated technological know-how and recorded experience. Things that might seem obvious to us today, such as the bow and arrow as a specialised weapon for hunting, had to be *invented* – thought of, thought out, experimented with and perfected – with no prior example, book or internet to consult. These people were intelligent *pioneers* of human thought and experience. They worked out a harmonious relationship with the wide range of environments in which they lived, and learned to adapt when climate and environmental conditions changed, to an extent which our modern, ‘sophisticated’ societies could learn from. They were pioneers of technology, from simple *microliths* for tools, to grinding stones for making flour and baked clay pottery for storing and cooking food.

They developed religious thought, relating it to the world around them, especially the animals, the rain and the sun, on whom they all depended. And they worked out various forms of *societal organisation*. These ranged from small-scale hunter-gatherer family groups to the larger, more complex societies that developed with the adoption of pastoralism and cultivation. The latter enabled the growth of division between rich and poor and with it the emergence of powerful leaders. Religious beliefs were adapted to these changed circumstances – leaders often using religion as a basis for their monopoly of power.

[Chapter 1](#) traces the origins of human evolution, considering the evidence of fossils, environment and DNA analysis. It follows the development of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and the spread and settlement of Africa’s main modern linguistic groupings, up to the dawn of the agricultural revolution. [Chapter 2](#) discusses the emergence of crop cultivation and animal husbandry from about 10,000 years ago, and its spread and impact within Africa. Politically, farming’s biggest impact was the ability to sustain an urban population, none more so than in the unique environment of the lower valley of the Nile. The chapter thus concludes with Ancient Egypt, a classic example of the transition from prehistory to recorded history. The most striking theme of this final section is the extremity

of autocracy that political power can reach and the use and abuse of that power in Ancient Egypt.

CHAPTER 1

Early prehistory of Africa

Human evolution

The most important thing to understand about the science of evolutionary theory is that it is constantly evolving in the light of new evidence and the reinterpretation of old evidence. But one thing that has stood the test of time is the conclusion that Africa was the continent in which early forms of humans and fully modern humans, with brains just like ours, first evolved. And it was from Africa that they finally spread to inhabit the rest of the world.

The evidence

The material evidence for human evolution has been found in the form of ancient bones, fossils, stone tools and other artefacts. Fossils are formed when animal or plant remains are trapped in mud that is then squeezed under great geological pressure to form rock. All that remains of the organic matter within the rock is an exact imprint (a fossil) that is revealed if the rock is broken open, by further natural process or by human intervention. Scientific geological methods can be used to give an approximate age to the formation of rocks and hence to their fossils.

The potassium-argon dating technique measures the changing ratio between these two elements during radioactive decay in rocks that are over 1 million years old. It is particularly useful for the volcanic rocks of Ethiopia and the East African Rift. Radiocarbon dating measures the radioactive decay of carbon-14 atoms in dead organic matter, such as

bones and charcoal, that is less than 40,000 years old. It cannot measure a precise age, but instead offers a probable age range and is most useful in providing a chronology rather than a particular date.

The increasing sophistication of the modern study of genetics has made DNA analysis an important tool for tracing relationships between ancient peoples and their movement both within and out of Africa.

Climate change

Archaeologists have recently come to appreciate the importance of climate change as a potential influence on early human development and behaviour. The earth has gone through many changes in climate during the millions of years of its existence, and scientists are able to measure past climates by taking deep borings from the ice sheet, particularly in Greenland. From these and from borings into the ocean floor, it is possible to measure the climate of the distant past.

At times, the world's climate has been a lot colder than at present, with the ice coverage of the poles being extended well into the temperate zones of Europe, Asia and North America. These ultra-cold periods, often lasting for thousands of years, are commonly known as 'ice ages'. Africa lies beyond the range of the northern and southern ice sheets, but during the ice ages of the past, with much of the world's fresh water – and thus potential rain – tied up in ice, Africa experienced these periods as times of extreme dryness. Deserts expanded and the rainforest contracted, sometimes into isolated 'islands' of forest growth in the heart of the Congo Basin. Many animals could not cope with the changed environment and became extinct, and early humans too had to adapt or die.

There have been times, too, when the climate has been a lot warmer than at present. In those periods, the ice sheets melted, extra moisture was released into the air and Africa experienced much higher rainfall. Then the rainforest expanded, rivers flowed where today is only desert, and the Sahara itself was covered in savannah grassland.

The earliest hominins

In terms of evolution, modern human beings belong to the primate family of 'hominins'. Hominin (formerly known as hominid) is a general biological name for human or humanlike creatures with enlarged brains and the ability to walk upright on two legs. For tens of thousands of years, modern human beings have been the only

surviving hominins. But, in the early stages of human evolution, there were a number of different species. From the fossil evidence, it appears that many millions of years ago the earliest species of hominin evolved away from the other main family of primates, the great African forest apes: the gorilla and the chimpanzee.

There are significant gaps in the fossil evidence and so little is known about the earliest hominins. But it appears that sometime between about 10 million and 5 million years ago, perhaps during a glacial dry period when the tropical forest contracted, they moved into the more open savannah grasslands and woodlands of eastern and southern Africa. There they began to develop the techniques of standing and walking on two legs. In terms of survival and evolution this had a number of distinct advantages. In the open savannah, standing upright enabled them to see over the grassland and spot predators such as lions and leopards that hunted them for food. Those best able to stand upright survived longer, reproduced more and passed this advantage on to their descendants. A further highly important advantage of two-legged walking was that it left the hands free to carry food and use tools. Fingers no longer needed to be short and strong for hanging on to branches in the forest. The early hominins were able to evolve elongated fingers for performing intricate tasks and, eventually, for making their own tools.

The Australopithecines and early evolution of Homo (man)

The fossil record of the past 5 million years is continually being expanded with finds of early hominin fossils from eastern and southern Africa as well as the Sahara. The evidence up to 1.5 million years ago forms a complex story of the evolution and extinction of numerous related species of early hominin. Most of these belong to the genus known as *Australopithecus* ('southern ape'). They were largely scavengers, some vegetarian, others meat-eaters, and they had a brain capacity less than a third that of modern humans. They were *tool users* rather than *toolmakers*: they did not shape their own tools, but rather used whatever suitable sticks and stones they found available.

In 1964, paleoanthropologists Mary and Louis Leakey discovered the fossilised skull of a new species of hominin in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania ([Figure 1.1](#)). It was dated to about 2.5 million years ago and was associated with stone tools that had clearly been deliberately *made*. This was an important change in the evolution of early hominins. A number of animals, such as chimpanzees, use sticks and

other implements to assist in their foraging for food; but the ability to make and shape one's own tools and to use these tools for hunting as well as foraging had always been assumed to be a uniquely human (*Homo*) trait, setting humans apart from other animals and the Australopithecines. Thus although the brain capacity of this fossil was barely half that of modern humans, it has been assumed to be the earliest form of human and, as such, has been designated *Homo habilis* ('handy man'). Its associated tools were named Oldowan, from the gorge in Tanzania where they were first discovered. They were simple chopping and cutting tools, made by chopping flakes off a volcanic pebble to form a sharp edge (see [Figure 1.2a](#)). Some of the flakes were probably used for cutting or scraping skins and perhaps for whittling sticks. The final shape of the tool, however, was predetermined largely by the structure of the stone.

Some of the late species of *Australopithecus* continued to live alongside *Homo habilis*, but they probably found it increasingly difficult to compete for food with the more efficient *Homo* species. By the time of the next major evolutionary advance, 1.5 million years ago, the Australopithecines had all become extinct.

Figure 1.1 Olduvai Gorge, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Serengeti, Tanzania, East Africa. It was here that Louis and Mary Leakey discovered Oldowan tools and the first fossil of *Homo habilis* in the early 1960s.



Technology and the 'Stone Ages' of Africa

From the middle of the twentieth century, it became customary for archaeologists and historians (including earlier editions of this book) to divide the period of stone toolmaking in Africa into three 'ages', the Early, Middle and Late (or Later) Stone Ages. This periodisation placed the simple choppers and scrapers of the early *Homo* scavengers at one end of the spectrum and the precisely shaped and sharpened *microliths* ('tiny stones') of modern *Homo sapiens* ('wise man') hunter-gatherers at the other end. Archaeologists now, however, tend to consider this periodisation as too simplistic and even misleading. The system of ages necessarily implies primitivity for simple tools and advanced intellect for complex microliths. And yet, simple tools were often used alongside microliths, with no implication that they were evidence of the continued existence of more primitive people.

Thus, rather than slot a particular technology and its users into a particular 'age', the tendency nowadays among archaeologists and historians is to focus on the technology and try to work out what it tells us about the people using the tools.

The evolution of humankind in Africa



Climate change and the evolution of modern humans

Over the past 2 million years, the earth has experienced numerous ice ages, some lasting a few hundred thousand years, others, just as severe, lasting only a few thousand, each age interspersed with warmer moist periods. With increasing evidence of the timing and extent of past climate change, archaeologists have come to appreciate the probable impact of these glacial cycles on the evolution of the human species and their technology. For Africa, the cool dry climate of the ice ages appears to have provided the greatest pressure for adaptation.

During the particularly long, dry glacial period of 1.8 million years ago to 1.6 million years ago, *Homo erectus* ('upright man') evolved and

appears to have displaced the earlier *Homo habilis*. Whether this new species evolved directly from *Homo habilis* or from another similar species is not yet clear. *Homo erectus* had a larger brain (two-thirds that of modern humans) and larger body, better able to roam great distances across the expanded open savannah. They were the first hominins to make specific and precise stone tools, to a predetermined shape. The tool for which they are best known is the handaxe, known as 'Acheulian' after the place in France where one was first discovered. Despite the French origin of the name, however, the vast majority of Acheulian tools that have since been unearthed have been found in Africa. The handaxe was a tough, sharp, heavy tool, chipped on both sides and shaped to a deliberate point (see [Figure 1.2b](#)). It could have been used for slicing, chopping or digging.

Archaeologists have found some beautifully made examples of the Acheulian handaxe, which must have been the product of hours of skilled labour. Some may even have had symbolic ritual functions. There are certainly signs of some form of ritual or early religion with the beginnings of the deliberate burial of the dead. Furthermore, with *Homo erectus*, we have the first sign of the use of regular, seasonal camps and cooperative hunting efforts as opposed to simple scavenging. They had also learned to control and use fire, possibly for hunting, certainly for roasting meat and probably also for warmth.

Homo erectus was the first hominin to move out of Africa into Asia and southern Europe. Evidence of their remains or the tools they made between 1 million and just over 0.5 million years ago have mostly been found in various parts of Africa; but some have been found in southern Europe and Asia, even as far away as China and Java.

The period between about 1 million and 500,000 years ago was a time of considerable climatic and environmental instability. This must have put a great deal of pressure on the African population of *Homo erectus* and by about 600,000 years ago they appear to have been replaced in the fossil record by the evolution of *Homo heidelbergensis*. This species is believed to be the common ancestor of *Homo neanderthalensis* (an early form of modern humans whose remains have been found in southern Europe and parts of Asia) and *Homo sapiens*. A skull found at Kabwe (Broken Hill) in Zambia in 1921 and dated to sometime after 400,000 years ago is a clear African example of *Homo heidelbergensis*. From the archaeological evidence of their camps, we know that about 500,000 years ago the social group size of *Homo heidelbergensis* had increased to about 150 individuals. This has given rise to the assumption that early forms of human language must have been developed by this time, language being the only way that a group of this size could have functioned together socially. Over the

following 200,000 years, their stone tool technology became more complex, with stone, wood and bone being used in conjunction to make composite tools.

By 300,000 years ago, *Homo heidelbergensis* had evolved the same brain size as modern humans and had begun to move into Asia and Europe. It was from these that the European and Asian versions of *Homo neanderthalensis* evolved. Meanwhile, those Heidelbergers that remained in Africa had given way to modern *Homo sapiens*. Until very recently, it was believed that this took place in eastern or southern Africa, over a short period of time, about 200,000 years ago. However, research published in the scientific journal *Nature* in June 2017 has revealed that a wealth of modern human fossils found in a cave near Marrakesh in Morocco can be dated to about 300,000 years ago.¹ This suggests what the researchers call ‘a pan-African origin’ for the evolution of modern *Homo sapiens*. Furthermore, it may have been a more gradual process than previously thought – perhaps taking place in different parts of the continent between 400,000 and 200,000 years ago.

Ongoing research

As mentioned earlier, the science of human evolution is constantly evolving. In recent years, a cache of Oldowan-grade tools has been found near the shores of Lake Turkana in northern Kenya. These tools have been dated to 3.3 million years ago, predating the original Oldowan and *Homo habilis*-related tools by more than 1 million years. Were these made by *Homo habilis*, fossils of whom have not yet been found for that date; or by some other *Homo* species not yet discovered; or does toolmaking predate the *Homo* species altogether? These are the sort of challenges facing current evolutionary research. And then there is the discovery of a huge cache of bones in a cave in South Africa. These bones were excavated between 2013 and 2014, and have subsequently undergone preliminary evaluation (*National Geographic*, October 2015, pp. 30–57). They comprise the remains of up to 15 individuals, male, female and child. Their brain cases are small, but they appear to have mostly *Homo* characteristics, although with some earlier, Australopithecine-type features. Lee Berger, their excavator, has named them *Homo naledi*, after the Dinaledi (‘Rising Star’) Chamber in which they were found. Having been found as bones in a cave and not as fossils in datable rocks, they remain a mystery. Assuming they are all genuine remains from the same era, it will not

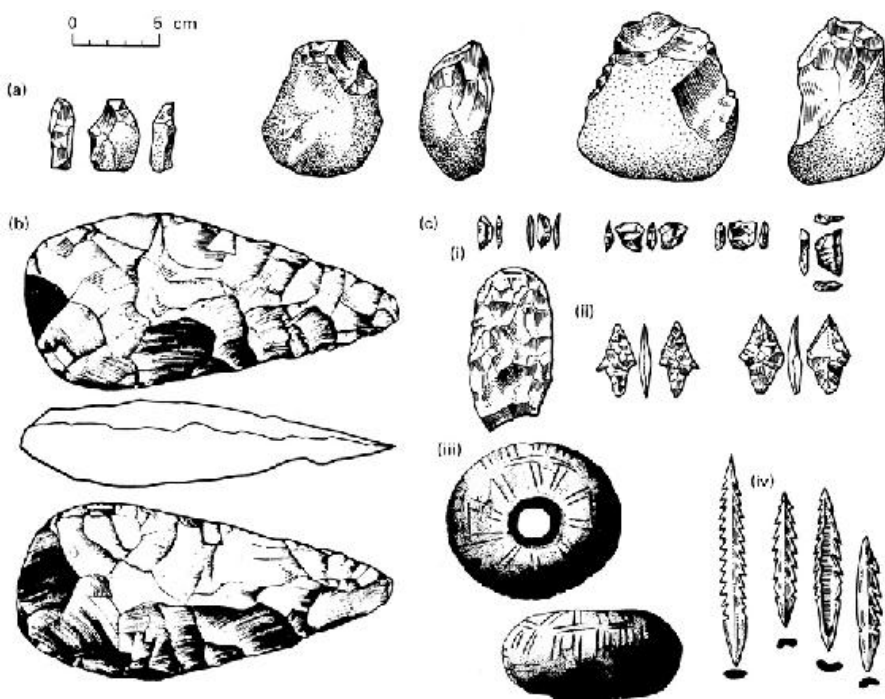
be possible to see where they fit into the complex web of human evolution until they have been accurately dated, and this may take some time. In the meantime, Berger has been criticised by his fellow scientists for rushing to publication and publicity before the analysis of his finds was complete and peer reviewed.

Figure 1.2 Microliths and other artefacts of the African Stone Age

(a) Oldowan tools from the Olduvai Gorge

(b) The characteristic Acheulean handaxe, from Kamoia, southern Congo

(c) (i) microliths; (ii) axe and arrow heads; (iii) decorated bored stone for weighting a digging stick; (iv) bone harpoon heads.



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Homo sapiens populate the world

The evolution of fully modern human beings appears to have occurred in the savannah woodlands of eastern and southern Africa. These people had the same brain capacity and ability to think as people in our own century. They were, in effect, the same as us. The only thing they lacked was our learned experience and accumulated knowledge.

Thus they were the original *pioneers* in the development of human thought, philosophy, religion and technology. Although population levels were still very low by today's standards, by 90,000 years ago *Homo sapiens* were to be found across most of the African continent. Modern DNA tracings show that the ancestry of all modern human populations can be traced back to an African origin. Although some *Homo sapiens* migrated into western Asia (the 'Middle East') possibly as much as 100,000 years ago, the first major migration out of Africa appears to have occurred about 60,000 years ago, during a particularly dry period when population levels in Africa were dangerously low. Indeed, some scientists believe that *Homo sapiens* was close to extinction at this time and migration may have saved the species. There is some dispute as to whether the first migration 'out of Africa' was via Sinai into western Asia or across the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb from Djibouti to Arabia. Whatever their exact route, they spread through southern Asia to Malaysia and on to Australia. Other major migrations both in and out of Africa between 55,000 and 40,000 years ago took them to China and into southern Europe. It is believed that they crossed the then land bridge of the Bering Strait into Alaska about 15,000 years ago. And by 12,000 years ago, they had reached South America and spread to all the major regions of the world.

Since the earliest *Homo sapiens* came from tropical Africa, they were probably brown-skinned and similar in appearance to one or more of the many variations of African peoples today. As they spread throughout Africa and colonised the other continents of the world, they adapted to variations in climate and environment. Those in the heat of tropical Africa developed the darkest skin to protect them from the harmful rays of the direct tropical sun. Those moving to cooler climates developed paler skins in order to absorb more of the beneficial rays of the less direct sunlight. The so-called 'racial differences' between the various peoples of the world are thus literally only skin deep; local adaptations to climate, diet and environment. All human beings belong to the same species, and the origins of that species are to be found in Africa.

The stone technology most closely associated with *Homo sapiens* is the *microlith* (see [Figure 1.2\(c\)\(i\)](#)). Stone flakes were shaped and reshaped into tiny precise points and blades, sometimes in specific geometric shapes such as triangles and crescents. The thick edge of the blade was chipped back to make it steeper and stronger. These 'backed' blades were almost certainly hafted onto wooden shafts to form spears and arrows. One of the main advances in hunting technology during the period from 40,000 years ago was the

development of the bow and arrow. This enabled a great improvement in hunting techniques. At the same time, people made a wide range of fine bone tools: awls, needles, fish hooks and barbs for arrows or harpoons. Furthermore, there is evidence of considerable artistic development; from eggshell beads to adorn the person, to the great works of rock painting and engraving found across many parts of Africa.

That this change in skin colour did not happen straight after leaving Africa is shown by recent DNA analysis of a 10,000-year-old skeleton found in a cave in southern England. Known as 'Cheddar Man', he had a dark brown to black complexion and dark curly hair, combined with blue eyes. The eyes indicate he came from a settled European population, but the dark skin suggests that the change to light skin was much more recent than previously supposed. It is thought that the subsequent change to a grain-based farming diet, low in vitamin D, increased the need to absorb more vitamin D from sunlight, hence the relatively recent development of pale skin colour.

For more information, go to www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/cheddar-man-mesolithic-britain-blue-eyed-boy.html.

Homo sapiens, the hunter-gatherer

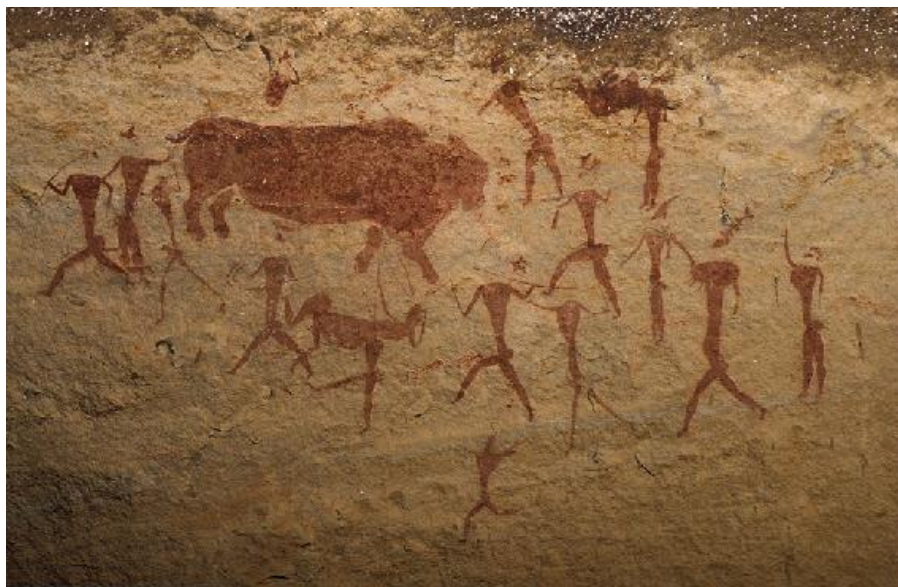
Until such time as people developed the techniques of growing their own food crops and taming their own animals, they relied for their livelihood on hunting wild animals and gathering the plants that grew naturally on the land. Even their tools and ornaments – made of stone, bone, leather or eggshell – were the product of natural materials gathered from the land.

Much of our knowledge about the way of life of these hunter-gatherers has come from extensive archaeological research, particularly over the past 50 years. Evidence of widespread microlith technology has been found throughout the savannah grasslands and dry woodlands of Africa. Perhaps the richest single source has been the excavation at Gwisho springs in the Kafue valley of central

Zambia. Here, in the waterlogged soils of the Kafue flats a unique range of vegetable matter as well as stone and bone materials have been preserved, together with as many as 30 human skeletons. The site dates to about 2000 BCE. This and other less dramatic sites in eastern, central and southern Africa reveal a fairly clear picture of a hunting and gathering way of life probably typical of many of the peoples of the savannah regions of Africa.

But perhaps the most vivid evidence surviving from these times is to be found in the paintings and engravings, which the people themselves made on the rock walls of their caves and shelters. Examples of these have survived right across the drier regions of Africa from the mountains of the central Sahara in the north to the Drakensberg mountain range in the south (Figure 1.3). Their paints – mainly red, yellow, orange and white – were made from animal fats coloured with vegetable dyes and applied with sticks and feathers. Most show scenes of living creatures, animals and humans. Some appear to portray events such as hunting, fishing or dancing. Others are more abstract and may be inspired by religious beliefs about life, death and the spirit world.

Figure 1.3 San rock art in Bamboo Hollow, Giants Castle, uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa.



Source: Roger de la Harpe/Getty Images.

Hunting

Careful study of the animal bones and stone artefacts recovered from their campsites has revealed much about the hunting practices of these modern humans. In the savannah regions of Africa, they hunted a wide range of animals, large and small. Specially shaped microliths were glued and bound to wooden shafts to form multi-barbed spears, but perhaps the most important hunting weapon was the bow and arrow. The arrow shaft was tipped with a barbed point of stone or bone, which had been treated with carefully prepared vegetable poison. This enabled small groups of hunters to effectively hunt the large antelope and buffalo that ranged the plains of Africa. The poison, though slow to work, would eventually wear down even the largest animal. Many smaller animals were also caught in snares, traps and possibly nets. In the densely wooded areas of the tropical forest regions, the lightweight bow and arrow was not so widely used. Here, larger, simpler tools and weapons were preferred as people hunted with traps, pits, spears and axes.

Hunted animals were not only a source of meat for diet: their bones were used for making tools and ornaments, while the leather of their skins was a valuable raw material. Animal skins were scraped with sharp, thumb-sized stone scrapers. They were then dried, softened and used for clothing, shelter, leather thongs, gathering bags or slings for carrying babies.

Fishing

Most people took advantage of whatever food resources were readily available, including fishing in rivers and lakes. Fish are rich in protein and when abundant they are fairly easily caught in large numbers once the technology has been mastered. In some areas, such as western and southern Africa, shellfish gathered from among the rocks along the coast became a dominant source of food, with important implications for the lifestyle of the communities involved. It demanded only a simple technology and encouraged the establishment of seasonal camps. Stranded seals were hunted at certain times of the year and bone-tipped harpoons, tidal traps and nets were also employed in active fishing.

Gathering

While the archaeological evidence for hunting and fishing is fairly

easily interpreted, the evidence for gathering is not so obvious. Vegetable matter tends not to survive so well over the centuries as animal bones or the stone tips of spears and arrows. Twentieth-century studies of the few surviving hunter-gatherer communities, however, revealed that gathering accounted for up to three-quarters of the normal daily diet. There is no reason to suppose that gathering was any less important for the hunter-gatherers of the distant past.

Gathering was probably done mainly by the women, using digging sticks and carrying bags. They collected a variety of wild fruits, nuts and melons, and dug up edible roots and tubers from the ground. They also collected things like termites, caterpillars and locusts. In many ways, the gathering of plant food was more reliable than hunting. The fruits of trees and bushes could be harvested each year and experienced gatherers could move around from place to place according to the seasonal harvests of various plants.

Social organisation

From the evidence of their campsites, it appears that hunter-gatherer communities usually lived in small, family-sized groups. In drier regions these often comprised no more than about 20 individuals. In wetter regions where game and vegetable food was abundant, they seem to have lived in groups of up to 50 or even 100 people. But whatever the size of group, they were probably loosely organised on a family basis. Judging by the experience of recent hunter-gatherer groups, there would likely have been free movement between groups for marriage or other purposes. Where caves and overhanging rocks were available, they used these for shelters. In more open countryside, they made temporary windbreaks out of branches, grass and stones. In some areas, where seasonal camps were used for weeks or months at a time, conical shelters might be built of sticks bent and bound together and thatched with grass.

Twentieth-century studies of San hunters of the Kalahari suggest that one of the most important aspects of hunter-gatherer groups was their dependence on cooperative labour and communal effort for survival. Although there was a division of labour between men and women, neither one had higher status than the other. They recognised their equal dependence on each other. At the end of the day, gathered and hunted food was brought back to the camp and shared equally among the group. No special status was granted to the successful hunter.

Figure 1.4 A San hunting camp in the Kalahari in the mid-twentieth century. Despite widespread urbanised development, many San family groups such as this preferred to maintain their traditional hunting and gathering way of life, in close harmony with nature, although using the gun in preference to the bow and arrow and taking on seasonal herding or other employment as and when they felt the need. But in recent decades their freedom to hunt has been restricted. The Central Kalahari Game Reserve, created in 1961 to enable the San to continue their hunting lifestyle, has now been turned into a game reserve primarily for tourists. San hunting has been severely restricted and camps such as this are now a thing of the past.



Source: © Eye Ubiquitous/Alamy Stock Photo.

Further climate change, adaptation and the ancestry of African languages

In the period 20000–16000 bce, the climate and vegetation of Africa was similar to what it was until recent decades (see [Map 0.1](#)). The Congo Basin was dominated by rainforest vegetation that stretched along most of the west African coastal region as far as southern Senegal. North and south beyond this lay drier forest, giving way to open woodland savannah, grassland savannah, dry steppe and then

desert. On the plateaux of east and southern Africa, savannah woodlands and grasslands predominated. Between 16000 and 11500 BCE, however, Africa experienced a much drier climate: the rainforest contracted and the desert zones expanded. Human populations faced a crisis, as old hunting and gathering techniques were found to be inadequate in the changed environment, and population levels dropped dramatically. Those that did learn to adapt, however, spread their technology, and with it their cultures and languages, to the four corners of the continent. It is to them that the ancestry of the four indigenous language families of modern Africa can be traced.

Linguists who have studied the language families of Africa have traced the probable origins of at least three of the four to the general region of northeastern Africa and the middle and upper valley of the Nile (see [Map 1.2](#)). Between the Nile cataracts of Nubia (northern Sudan), the Red Sea and the Ethiopian highlands, ancestral speakers of the Afro-Asiatic language family specialised in collecting wild grasses and roots. They roasted the seeds and, using grinding stones, ground them and the dried roots into flour that they baked as flat bread. The Afro-Asiatic speakers expanded southwards into and around the Ethiopian highlands, through the 'Horn of Africa' and on to the east African plateau where they were the ancestors of Cushitic-speaking peoples. They also took their grass-threshing and grinding techniques northwards into Egypt and western Asia. In due course, they spread westwards across north Africa where they assimilated the earlier Capsian hunter-gatherers and became the ancestors of the Berber-speaking peoples.

South of the Afro-Asiatic speakers, in the grazing lands between the Nuba Mountains and the middle Nile, the ancestors of the Nilo-Saharan language speakers are thought to have had their origins. They specialised in hunting the large antelope that grazed these favourable grasslands, using mainly throwing spears. Their prey probably included ancestors of the wild Saharan cattle that they were later to domesticate. They spread mostly westwards along the grassland zone south of the Sahara towards Lake Chad and the Niger Bend. The Songhay speakers of the middle Niger can be traced to this origin. Nilo-Saharans also spread southwards towards the Great Lakes, southwest of the Ethiopian highlands, and are ancestral to the Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer and Acholi of this region.

South and west of the Nilo-Saharans, the ancestors of the Niger-Congo language family specialised in hunting the woodland savannah of west Africa armed with bow and poisoned arrow. They also dug for wild yams and fished with hook and line and probably baskets too. The languages of Kordofan, west of the middle Nile, are linked to the

Niger-Congo family, which has prompted some linguists to suppose that Kordofan may have been the original ancestral home of the Niger-Congo group, that then migrated westwards to west Africa. Others, however, feel it was more likely the other way round, with Kordofanian being a remote offshoot of Niger-Congo. Stone Age hunters of the Congo forest, known to archaeologists as the Lupembian tradition, are probably ancestral to the Bambuti and Batwa hunters of modern times. Their ancestral languages have been lost, as from about 1000 BCE, they were absorbed into the Bantu language subgroup of the Niger-Congo family (see [Chapter 4](#)).

The spread of African languages, 15000–10000 bce



The word Khoesan is a composite linguistic term for the family of languages spoken by the Khoekhoe and the San hunter-gatherers (and later herders) of southwestern Africa. Khoesan is also used as a generic term for the Khoekhoe and San people.

Finally, the Khoesan family of languages appears to have had its origins in the east African region of Tanzania. The main strength of the Khoesan speakers lay in the wide range of their hunting and gathering microlith technology, the bow and poisoned arrow and the bored stone weights for digging sticks for unearthing edible tubers (see [Figure 1.2\(c\)\(iii\)](#)). The Khoesan speakers spread throughout south-central and southern Africa, assimilating earlier hunter-gatherers ([Figure 1.5](#)). Their technology was particularly suited to exploiting the dry, semi-desert zones of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, which is probably why their hunting and gathering culture survived into modern times in these areas. In most of eastern, central and southern Africa, the Khoesan were assimilated by Bantu speakers of the Niger-Congo group from the beginning of the Common Era (see [Chapter 4](#)). Their only descendants surviving in Tanzania are the Hadza and Sandawe.

Figure 1.5 A San hunter photographed in Zimbabwe in about 1900, one of the few such people to have survived in that region into the twentieth century.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The spread of languages and cultures described in this section was a process of assimilation rather than displacement. In some cases, it may have been the technology and its associated culture and language that spread rather than actual people in any great numbers. Their new techniques for surviving in adverse circumstances, however, were so successful that they resulted in two consequences of major importance

for the later prehistory of Africa. First, their languages, social customs and religious beliefs came to dominate and assimilate all previous languages and cultures on the continent. The combination of the old and the new produced unique new regional cultures and dialects that formed the ancestral origins of Africa's historic peoples. Second, their knowledge and understanding of intensive hunting and gathering in adverse environmental conditions laid the foundation for the development of farming and pastoralism as soon as more favourable climatic conditions prevailed.



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CHAPTER 2

Later prehistory: farming and pastoralism in tropical Africa and Ancient Egypt

So far, we have seen in [Chapter 1](#) that by about 10,000 years ago, human societies in Africa had developed stone-based technology to a remarkably high standard. But they remained essentially hunters and gatherers. They were still totally dependent for their food and general livelihood on hunting wild animals and gathering the wild plants that grew on the land. Then, from about 8000 BCE (Before the Common Era), major changes in this age-old way of life were made possible by the development of farming and the herding of animals.

Crop cultivation, domestication and the origins of farming

The first movement towards crop cultivation probably began with the gathering of wild grain, as described in [Chapter 1](#). There was a natural concentration on the heavy yielding ‘grasses’ usually known as ‘cereals’. These were mainly wheat and barley in western Asia and Egypt and sorghum and millets in the summer rainfall, savannah lands of tropical Africa. Cultivation began with the deliberate protection and weeding, saving seed and resowing of wild grains, and likewise with root crops. It was soon realised that seeds from the strongest plants were the best ones to plant for the heaviest crops next year. When this principle was pursued through many plant generations, the plant became reliant on the assistance of human cultivators. In its new enlarged form, it could no longer compete with weeds or survive in the wild without human intervention and protection. At this point, the

plant had become 'domesticated' and true farming had commenced. This process, from the cultivation of wild crops to the farming of domesticated ones, was gradual and one that is not easily discerned in the archaeological record.

A similar process occurred with animals and the origins of pastoralism. Initially, the wild animals chosen as most suited to human needs were protected from predators and herded from one favourable feeding site to another. Well fed and without the need to flee from wild predators, the animals gradually, over generations, became too large and ungainly to survive on their own. Their larger size suited both the human herder, who gained more meat or milk per animal, and the herded animals (cattle, sheep, goats or camels) that had a longer and more prolific life under human protection. When that point of dependence was reached, the animal in its new form could no longer survive on its own in the wild and had thus become 'domesticated'.

The impact of agriculture

With the development of farming, people began to live in larger, more permanent settlements. They no longer needed to be perpetually on the move in search of wild food. They were able to place their settlements in suitably fertile regions and grow their own food nearby. At the same time there was an increase in population. This was partly the result of an improved diet as food supply became more regular and abundant. And living in a more settled community, women were able to bear children more frequently. Small children were not such a burden as they had been in hunter-gatherer communities and they could be cared for by other members of the family within the safety of the home. Indeed, larger families meant an increase in agricultural labour. Children could work in the fields from an early age, scaring birds, weeding crops or tending domestic animals. Thus larger families could grow more food and this in turn made it possible to support an ever-larger population.

As people settled in one place for a longer period of time, they built more permanent houses. Often these were simple constructions, made of mud, poles, woven reeds and thatching; but sometimes the houses themselves or the walls enclosing the settlement were built of stone. Now that they were farmers as well as hunters and gatherers, people needed a wider range of tools. And living in more permanent settlements, they now had the space to store these and other possessions. They made baked-clay pottery, useful for storing, carrying

or cooking food and water. The remnants of their pottery and grinding stones, worn smooth from years of grinding grain, are often important items of archaeological evidence for the presence of early farming communities in ancient times. People gradually developed more sophisticated tools. Instead of merely chipping a core stone into the required shape, as in Acheulian times, the toolmaker now ground the stone against another harder rock. The result was a smooth sloping surface with a sharp edge, more like a modern metal axe head. Archaeologists and historians refer to this new stone technology as 'Neolithic', from the Greek words *neos* ('new') and *lithos* ('stone').

The development of farming brought important social as well as technical changes. Producing one's own food supply required social organisation, cooperation and planning within the community. People had to work together months in advance to plan future production: how much and when to plant, which crops where, and when to harvest. People had to plan for and store enough food to last from one harvest right through the year to the next. And in a good year they were able to produce a *surplus* of food, more than was actually needed to feed their own immediate family. If stored, this could be an important insurance against loss of future crops through natural disasters such as drought or flood. It also meant that a community could support a number of people not directly involved in food production: specialist craftsmen, ministers of religion or administrators and rulers who controlled and organised the planning of society. A surplus of food could be traded between neighbouring settlements in exchange for raw materials, luxuries or other items not produced within the community.

Finally, in agricultural and pastoral societies some of the equality and communal sharing of the hunter-gatherer was lost. With the production of a surplus, the existence of non-food-producing classes and a growth in personal possessions, there developed divisions between rich and poor in society. The extent of this varied from one society to another. In general, those non-producers who controlled production were richer than those who produced the surplus on which the former lived.

Pastoralism

The herding of domestic animals had similar advantages to crop cultivation. The animals were a real and potential source of food, particularly milk. They were often less frequently used for meat, but they could be so used if necessary; for instance, in times of drought and the failure of crops. Where the people were largely pastoralist

(that is, animal herders), rather than crop cultivators or mixed farmers, their settlements tended to be less permanent. They needed to move in search of varying seasonal pastures. But with a reliable source of food ready to hand in their domestic animals, they could still live in large communities. Moving from one seasonal settlement to another, they could carry their possessions and even housing materials such as poles and mats on the backs of their animals.

The 'agricultural revolution'

Traditionally, the 'agricultural revolution' has been seen as just that. It was believed that once people discovered how to grow their own food, their lives were totally revolutionised. Clearly, the potential changes and apparent advantages resulting from the development of farming were very great indeed. But this does not mean that all communities changed to a settled farming lifestyle as soon as they learned about it. Research in Africa has suggested that early moves towards crop cultivation may have been more gradual than previously thought. This is hardly surprising. Farming was not suitable in every environment and its disadvantages may have been apparent. Although farming could support a larger population, it left the people more exposed to the dangers of famine caused by natural disasters such as drought or flood. In any case, crop cultivation and the keeping of domestic animals was only one of several economic options. In many early farming communities, hunting, gathering and perhaps even fishing remained important sources of food and general livelihood. Indeed, as we shall see below, the Khoesan of southern Africa may have adopted herding because it fitted in with their migratory hunting practices, but they specifically did not develop cultivation. Probably, in their view, it would have involved a major and unnecessary break with the past.

Those who developed a dependence on farming needed to accept a hugely changed worldview. People were no longer working entirely within the confines of nature, and were much more dependent on the vagaries of climate. New relationships needed to be developed with the spiritual world; and thus the origins of Africa's indigenous religions can probably be traced to this period. African religious thought, practices and shrines have traditionally been intimately connected with the spiritual fertility of the land and the seasonal rituals of 'rain-making', cultivation, sowing and harvest. Indeed, some scholars now think that the initial domestication of cattle in Africa may have been related to their religious significance, and that this may have been just as important as their being a source of food. Judging by the way some of them were buried in the Upper Nile

valley – wrapped in matting and laid in the ground just like human burials – cattle appear to have been treated as sacred animals. This might have been a motivating factor leading to their initial protection and, in due course, domestication. On the other hand, pastoralists may have treated domesticated cattle as sacred because they were their main source of food, and thus of life itself.

The origins of farming and pastoralism in tropical Africa

From about 11000 BCE, the particularly dry phase in the African climate, described in [Chapter 1](#), came to an end with the return of higher levels of rainfall. By 9000 BCE, a new ‘wet phase’, with more rainfall than today, had reached a peak that lasted until about 6000 BCE. Thereafter, the higher levels of rainfall began to tail off until, by 3500 BCE, rainfall levels had reached something similar to those prevailing today. During the wet phase, the rainforest expanded, deserts contracted and the Sahara became habitable as an open grassland savannah. Rivers flowed from the Ahaggar and Tibesti Mountains of the central Sahara, and Lake Chad became a huge expanse of water, many times larger than today. The swamplands of the upper Niger ‘Delta’ and the Upper Nile ‘sudd’ were probably lakes at this time (see [Map 2.1](#)). These increased wetlands opened up new opportunities for people to develop fishing settlements, for which there is evidence right across ‘middle Africa’ from the Niger Bend and Lake Chad as far east as Lake Turkana. And it is to the beginning of this wet phase that the origins of farming in Africa can be traced ([Figure 2.1](#)).

Africa, 7000 bce: probable level of lakes and rivers in the last major wet phase

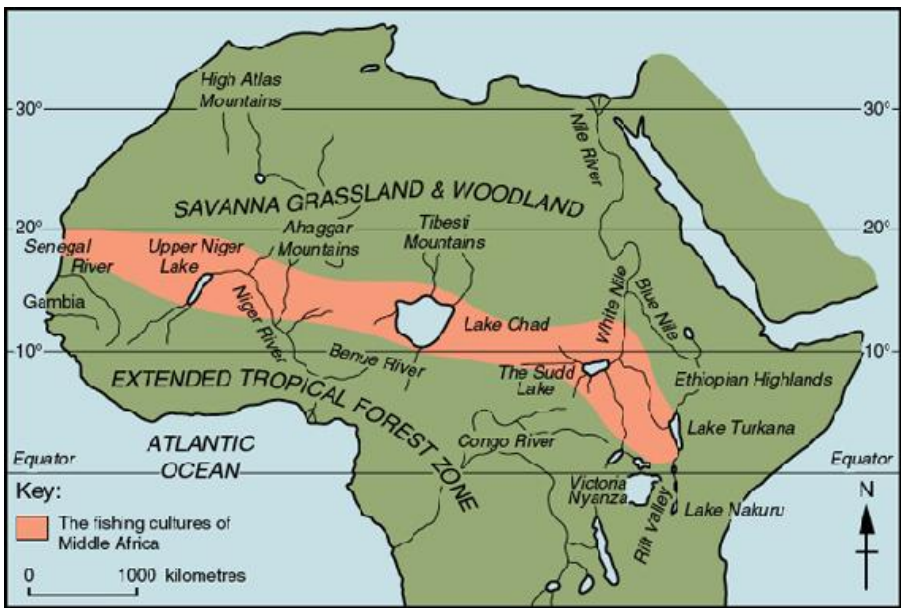


Figure 2.1 Herding cattle in Niger. These longhorn cattle, probably related to the Ankole cattle of Uganda, may ultimately be descended from the ancient domesticated wild cattle of the Sahara.



Source: © Melba Photo Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.

Nilo-Saharan beginnings

From 9000 BCE, the Nilo-Saharanans of the eastern Sahara adopted the grain-collecting and grinding practices of their northern neighbours, the Afro-Asiatics, and applied them to sorghum and pearl millet, the tropical grasses of the Upper Nile. By 8000 BCE, they had invented pottery in order to make porridge from their ground grains. Exactly at what point the sorghum and millet became domesticated is difficult to tell, but it was certainly before 7000 BCE. Nilo-Saharan cultivation practices and pottery-making spread north towards Egypt and westwards across the Sahara. By 5000 BCE, they had domesticated gourds and watermelons as well as cotton for weaving cloth. They may also have been responsible for domesticating the wild cattle of the Red Sea Hills between about 9000 and 8000 BCE, although so far there is only one piece of archaeological evidence supporting this idea. If true, however, this would have been 1,000 years earlier than the domestication of cattle in Asia. They grazed the cattle on the grasslands bordering the Nile and their herding practices eventually spread westwards into the central Sahara.

The importance of tsetse fly in the early spread of pastoralism

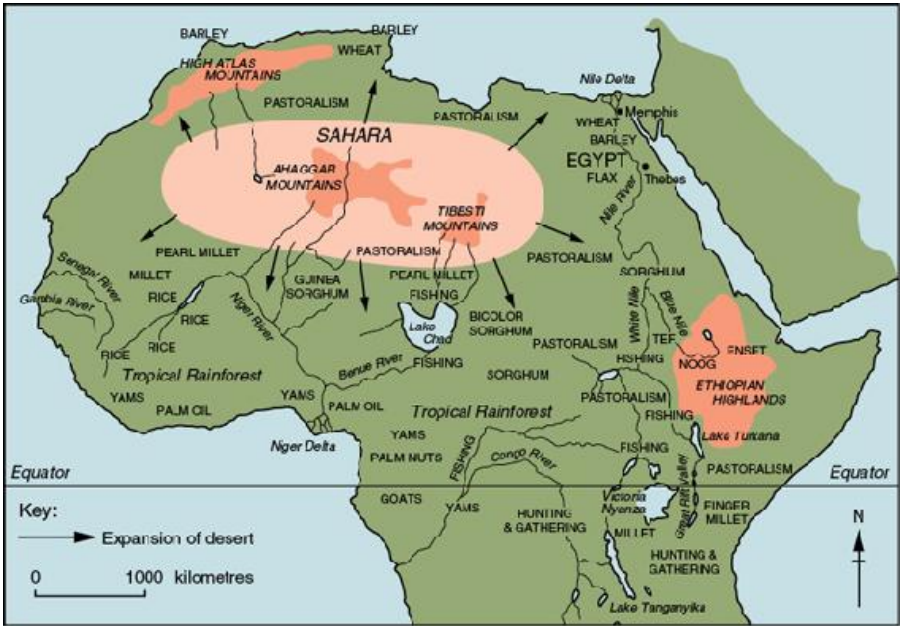
One important factor in the spread of pastoralism in certain parts of tropical Africa was the presence or absence of a blood-sucking insect called the 'tsetse fly'. A parasite carried in the saliva of certain tsetse causes 'sleeping sickness', a disease that can prove fatal to cattle and humans. Cattle as well as humans eventually develop some level of immunity to tsetse-borne disease; but, in general, a tsetse-ridden area was one to be avoided when non-immune pastoralists moved in search of new pastures. The tsetse tended to congregate in the moist low-lying valleys and thickly wooded regions where they found plenty of wild game on which to prey. Thus, the drier open savannah grasslands of the southern Sahara and the eastern and southern African plateaux were generally the regions where specialised pastoralism tended to develop.

Figure 2.2 A modern Peul pastoralist herding his cattle in the Sahel. The long horns of these cattle suggest that their ancestry may be related to ancient Saharan cattle, possibly domesticated in the Red Sea Hills 10,000 years ago.



Source: © Frans Lemmens/Alamy Stock Photo

‘Neolithic’ farming and pastoralism, northern and central Africa: 5000–1000 bce



Pastoralists of the Sahara

The period from 4000 to 2500 BCE was the great age of pastoralism in the Sahara. Cattle-based pastoralism was well established in the mountainous Ahaggar region of the central Sahara by 4000 BCE. These pastoralists were probably mainly Nilo-Saharanans, although they may have incorporated Afro-Asiatics from north Africa who probably brought west Asian sheep to the region. We know most about the Saharan pastoralists from the remarkable series of rock paintings they left behind. Their paintings are to be found in what are today some of the driest parts of the Sahara. The largest number of paintings date to the period 3500–2500 BCE. The paintings depict nearly every aspect of domestic life. In particular, they show their huge herds of long-horned cattle as well as sheep. The human figures depicted show a variety of mixed Mediterranean and black African types. They are shown wearing woven cloth, and elaborate ornaments, hairstyles and body decoration. They used round-based pots for storing milk and cattle blood, skin bags for water and pack oxen for carrying their possessions. The presence of grinding stones in their settlements suggests they also harvested grain.

Pastoralism and cultivation in northeast Africa

Meanwhile, in northeast Africa, the Afro-Asiatic Cushites took domesticated cattle from the Red Sea Hills southwards around the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands and into the grazing lands of the east African plateau. By 3500 BCE, Southern Cushites were herding cattle, sheep and goats south of the Ethiopian highlands in the region of Lake Turkana. There they met the southeastern Nilo-Saharanans who were cultivating sorghum, millet and beans. The Cushites adopted these cultivating practices as well as the Nilo-Saharan settlement pattern of round thatched houses surrounding a central cattle kraal that was enclosed within a hedge of thorns. They made the stone bowls that are characteristic of this culture and spread their settlements through east Africa between 3500 and 1000 BCE. Meanwhile, the local Afro-Asiatic speakers of the Ethiopian highlands developed their own distinctive crops. Among the more important of these were *tef*, a small-seeded cereal still important in Ethiopia today; *noog*, an oil plant; and *enset*, the starchy fibrous stalks of a thick-stemmed, banana-like plant.

Khoesan pastoralism in southern Africa

It is probably from these Cushite herders that the Khoesan of east

Africa learned sheep- and cattle-herding techniques and spread these herding practices southwards to the Khoe-speaking peoples of northern Botswana by about 500 BCE. By the turn of the Common Era, Khoe speakers were herding sheep and cattle as far south as the Cape of Good Hope. Although the Khoesan took to herding in the dry grasslands of southern Africa, they did not generally practise cultivation. This may have been because it did not suit their semi-nomadic lifestyle, as they moved between one seasonal pasture and another, combined as it was with the high efficiency and wide range of their hunting and gathering technology and skills. There was simply no economic or environmental pressure on them to make the huge change required by an agricultural lifestyle.

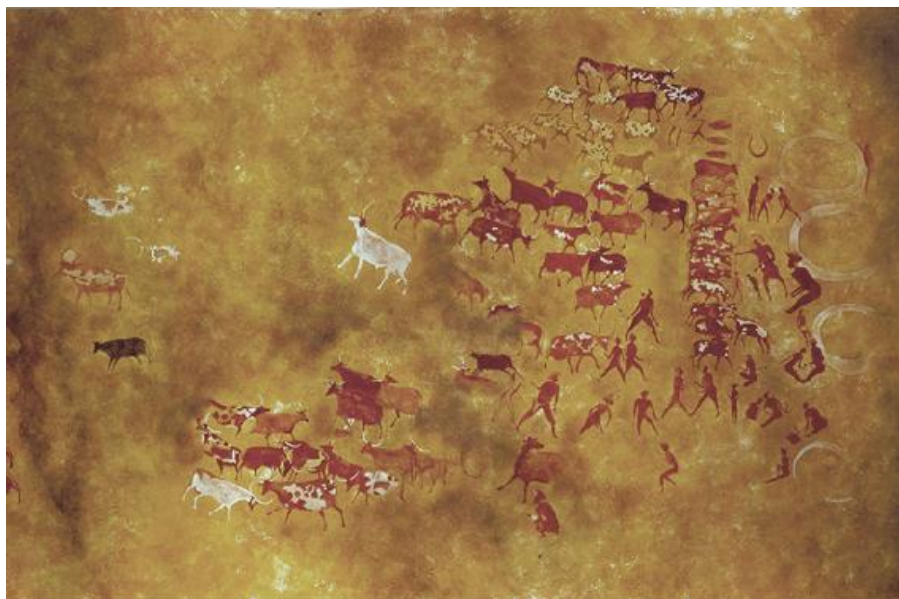


Figure 2.3 Tassilin-Ajjer (Tassili Plateau, Sahara), prehistoric rock painting: herd of cattle by a village (marked by white circles). Copied from a rock painting of the 2nd millennium bce.

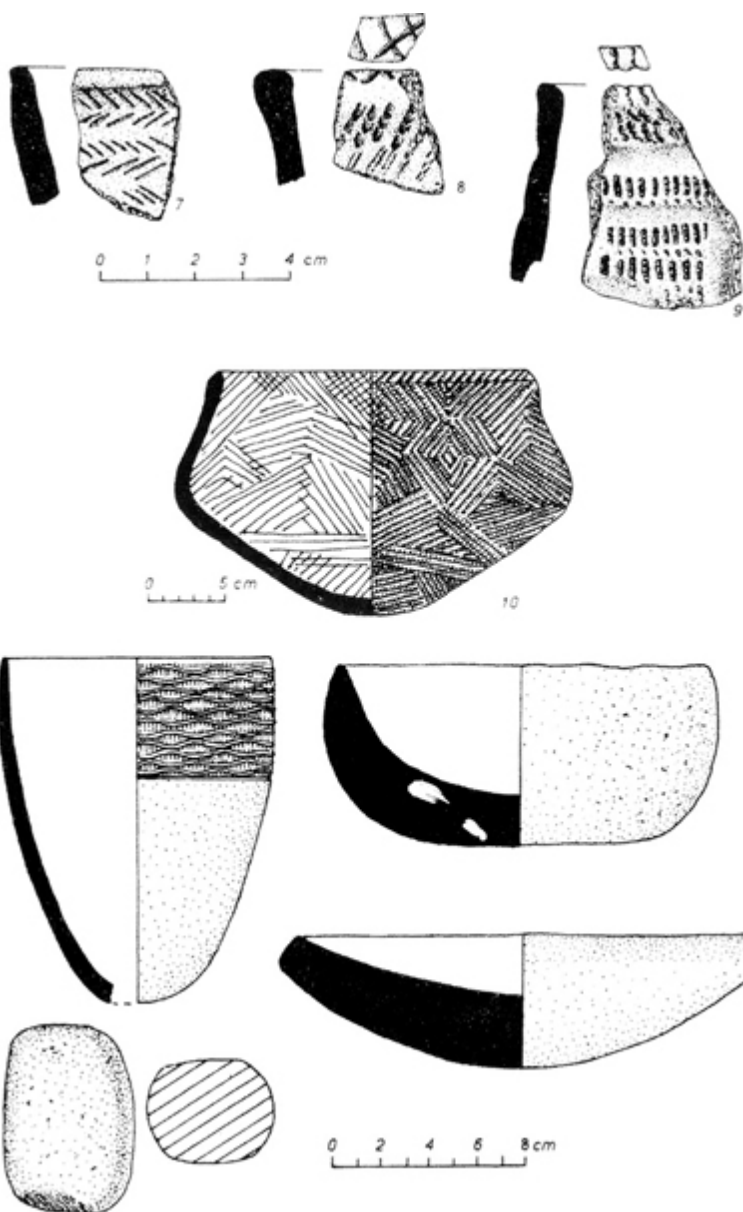
Source: akg-images/Erich Lessing.

Farming in west Africa

The Niger-Congo peoples of west Africa, however, like the Nilo-Saharan, took advantage of the wet phase between 9000 and 5500 BCE to develop agriculture by planting, in particular yams, in the expanded woodland of the region. They developed techniques for making stone axes that were ground and polished to a smooth shape

and fine point. These would have been used, by men, for clearing woodland for planting yams and other plants. The latter included the oil palm for oil and wine, peas, groundnuts and kola nut. A number of years ago in Nigeria archaeologists discovered a dugout canoe that they dated to about 8000 BCE, which makes it one of the oldest known canoes in the world. It could have been used for fishing, transporting people and goods or even trading. It was made from a hard wood like ebony and finely carved with pointed ends, which suggests that this was not a new development and its antecedents probably extended much further into the past. By 3000 BCE, west Africans had domesticated guinea fowl and were growing the raffia palm for making cloth. In the wetlands of the inland delta of the upper Niger, in what is today Mali, a west African rice was domesticated between 3000 and 1000 BCE and this was later spread to the high-rainfall forest margins of Guinea, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

Figure 2.4 Artefacts from the settlements and burials of Stone Age cultivators and pastoralists. The decorated shards of the top row were made from clay and baked in a fire. The two thin-walled examples in the centre show the sort of shapes that the complete pots would have formed. The two thick-walled pots (*lower right*) were carved from stone, the deep one probably for containing food. The hand-sized stone (*bottom left*) would have been for grinding grain in the shallow stone bowl (*bottom right*).



Women were the main planters of yams in Niger-Congo culture. This gave them a high status and may account for the development of matrilineal descent among the Niger-Congo peoples. In a matrilineal system, although positions of leadership and power in clan and village are held by men, these are inherited through the female line, from mothers and sisters.

The eastern branch of the Niger-Congo language family, the Bantu speakers, began moving into the rainforest around the Gulf of Guinea to the east of the Niger Delta. Travelling by dugout canoe, they

established riverside settlements, fished in the rivers and hunted in the forest. They brought goats and guinea fowl and colonised natural clearings in the forest. They cultivated yams and oil palm, beans and gourds. Between 3000 and 2500 BCE, they expanded their settlements southwards towards the Congo Basin, reaching the Congo River by about 2000 BCE. Some travelled northeastwards, up the Ubangui River, and eastwards along the northern edge of the forest. Others penetrated the forest south of the Congo, up great rivers like the Kasai and its tributaries, emerging in the woodland savannah of the plateau to the south of the forest by about 1000 BCE (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Political power

All over Africa, and beyond, the adoption of farming led to the development of settled communities and some degree of political authority. These communities would have started as extended family groups, some of them absorbing their less successful neighbours. There were inevitable social divisions within society; but political authority stemmed from family and kin-based concepts of power, and the rulers remained intimately involved in the productive process. In this period, it was only in the Upper Nile valley (of southern Egypt and northern Sudan) that a different kind of political concept arose, that of kingship and the nation-state.

Ancient Egypt and Nubia

Herders and farmers

Historically, the waters of the Nile have been, and still are, the lifeblood of Egypt. This is starkly illustrated by the narrow strip of bright green vegetation that hugs the banks of the river, defying the threatening wilderness of desert that stretches to the Red Sea in the east and the unending Sahara to the west. But it was not always thus.

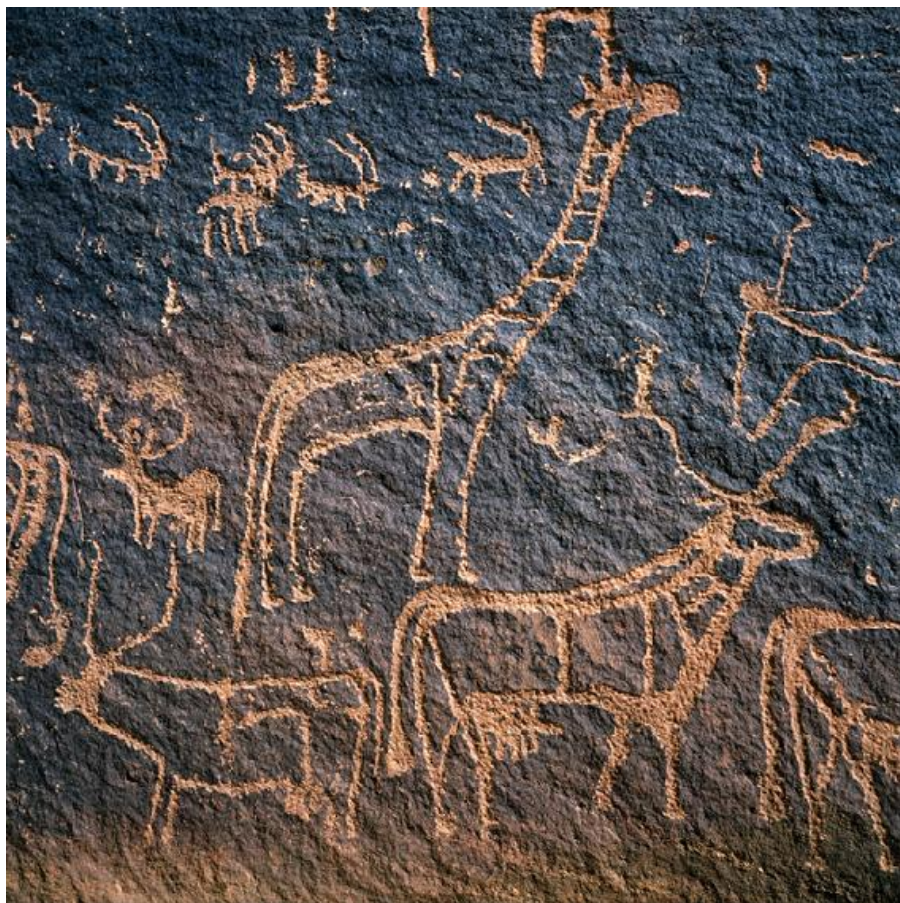
As we have already seen, from the peak of the climatic wet phase until at least 4000 BCE, what are today the Eastern and Western Deserts were savannah grasslands. Here, in the region of the Upper Nile, semi-nomadic pastoralists grazed their cattle out on the plains when the seasonal shallow pans and waterholes were filled by the summer rains. In the cooler, drier months, they moved their herds towards the waters of the Nile. It was a hard life, with their valuable cattle to protect from predators and the vagaries of the weather, especially from about 4000 BCE as they began to feel the impact of

climatic change. A strict hierarchy of leadership and social and gender stratification arose. Male leaders assumed the ownership of the cattle and exercised power over the common herdsman, while women, with no role in cultivation to provide them with high status, were confined to domestic work, the raising of children and gathering of wild foods.

We have already seen from their burials that cattle were treated as sacred animals and this is confirmed in the rock art that was cut into the mountains of the Eastern Desert. These pictures focus particularly on cattle, but also include ritual hunts and sacred boats. It appears that the rulers of these cattle-herding people were claiming sacred powers for themselves.

During the dry season, they developed close relations with the settled cultivators of the Nile valley. These relations became more intimate as the summer rains began to fail. Over a short 100-year period around 3600 BCE, the rains failed altogether and the semi-nomadic herding life came to an end. The herders moved permanently into the Nile valley, bringing with them their ideas of social stratification and sacred leadership. In doing so, they played a pivotal role in the rise of the unique civilization we know today as 'Ancient Egypt'.

Figure 2.5 Predynastic Egyptian rock art, from Wadi Manih, in the Eastern Desert, including wild fauna (giraffe) as well as domestic cattle.



Source: Getty Images/Jason Larkin.

The Nile offered a lot more than just the proximity of a perennial river. The modern hydroelectric damming of the Nile at Aswan has interrupted the annual inundation of the floodplain north of the first cataract. But across the millennia before the twentieth century, during the hot summer month of August, the flood waters of the Blue Nile carried fertile silt down from the highlands of Ethiopia and deposited it from the third cataract in Nubia, all the way northwards through the widening valley in Egypt as far as the Delta. After several weeks of inundation, the waters gradually retreated, leaving the soil refreshed and providing the moisture for irrigated cultivation that lasted until the next year's inundation. Furthermore, as a result of the regular passage of silt over the millennia, the actual banks of the river became higher than the surrounding plain. This allowed for a rapid and widespread flow of silted water across the land when the river rose and burst its banks. It also enabled farmers to keep irrigation channels flowing after the flood waters had receded.

Between 5000 and 4000 BCE, permanent settlements of full-time farmers had become established in the Upper Nile region of southern Egypt, where their farming techniques were adapted to the annual inundation. Their culture is known as 'Badarian', after the town of el-Badari in central Egypt. Here, numerous graves and cultural artefacts were uncovered by archaeologists in the 1920s and 30s, revealing a sophisticated farming culture. Their settlements were well positioned to exploit desert routes to the oases in the west and the Red Sea in the east. Through these routes they developed trade and close relations with the savannah herders.

The inward migration of the remaining pastoralists around 3500 BCE brought about a rapid increase in population. Competition for grazing and arable land became intense; and competition led to warfare. People moved into fortified towns for protection, leading to urbanisation and the intensification of agriculture. In Egypt north of the first cataract, farmers focused closely on the irrigation of the floodplain. Further south, in Nubia, where the floodplain was much narrower, this was compensated for by access to summer rainfall and here they were able to practise rain-fed cultivation of tropical cereals and the grazing of livestock. Social stratification already existed within both farming communities, but this was intensified under the influence of the highly stratified desert immigrants.

Origins of kingship

During these turbulent times, leaders formed political alliances for mutual protection. In due course, three regional groupings emerged along 500 kilometres of what was to become Upper Egypt, between the first cataract at Aswan and el-Badari (see [Map 2.3](#)). These proto-states – Tjeni, Nubt and Nekhen – managed to restore order and reopen and develop ancient trade routes across the desert to Nubia for gold, ebony and ivory, to the Red Sea, and even into western Asia. The products of this trade assisted the growth of kingship.

Leaders enhanced their authority by confining prestige goods such as gold and precious stones to the ruling class and the craftsmen they employed. The Badarians had a long tradition of placing valued items – pottery, tools and adornments – in their graves. The rulers of these emerging kingdoms took this idea a large step further by building tombs for themselves and filling them not only with everyday objects, such as boxes and jars of food and drink to sustain them in the afterlife, but also jewels and other high-value objects made of gold from Nubia, copper from the mines of the Eastern Desert, amethyst from the Western Desert and even the rare blue precious stone lapis

lazuli from Afghanistan. What are clearly royal burials have been dated to this period. One contained pottery decorated with symbols of kingship: feathers in the hair and a mace (a royal club) to smite enemies. The painted chamber of another showed a king smiting three captives. It is clear from these burials and others that the rulers were not only preparing for an afterlife. They expected to be sharing it on a par with the gods. A large tomb of this period found at Abdju (modern Abydos) contained an ivory sceptre – a symbol of sacred kingship – and jars labelled with hieroglyphics, one of the earliest known examples of pictogram writing.

Predynastic states of Ancient Egypt



The unification of Ancient Egypt

The three kingdoms were soon competing for control of trade routes. Archaeological evidence – huge town walls and broken skulls – suggests open warfare. But by about 3100 BCE, a single sacred king had emerged as the ruler of Upper Egypt. Within a generation that king, or his successor, had sailed his army northwards down the Nile. He conquered the Delta kingdom of Lower Egypt and brought the whole of Upper and Lower Egypt under his rule. In doing so, he founded what is known as the First Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. It is believed by many scholars that his name was Narmer (also known as Aha or Menes).

The Narmer palette

A siltstone palette covered in carved images and variously dated to between 3100 and 2950 BCE, was found more than 100 years ago at historic Nekheh, the southernmost of the original three kingdoms of Upper Egypt. The palette depicts an all-powerful king wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt. He is smiting his enemies with a mace, overlooked by an approving Horus, the hawk god of mythical Egyptian origins. It is carved on both sides and displays classical Egyptian art combined with human-faced cow-head goddesses and other mythical beasts referencing earlier predynastic beliefs. There is debate among scholars as to the meaning and purpose of the palette. Some believe that it is a celebration of royal strength, linking religious and temporal power. Others emphasise the image of the king as the source of order and stability, suppressing all opposition, internal and external. Yet others point to the name 'Narmer' that is spelt out in hieroglyphics above the image of the king and insist that the palette is a record of a historical event, namely, the unification of Egypt. It seems highly probable to the present writer that its depiction is a combination of all three interpretations.

The historiography of Ancient Egypt

The magnificence, precision and sheer age of the pyramids, temples, artwork, hieroglyphics and burial chambers of Ancient Egypt can easily distract one from the human story that is the real history of that remarkable nation-state. This unique civilisation lasted for nearly 3,000 years and it is easy to assume that little changed over that very long time span. A close look at the chronology, however, will reveal

the ups and downs of political power alongside a dynamic culture that was constantly developing and adapting. Sometimes change was spurred by internal conflict, sometimes it came in response to outside influences or attack.

Figure 2.6 Hieroglyphics carved into the rock face of the Abu Simbel Temple of Upper Egypt, built at the orders of Ramesses II, the longest reigning monarch of the New Kingdom, at the height of Egypt's imperial phase. Ramesses II used two cartouches, illustrated here, to indicate his name as both 'Son of Ra' (the sun god) and 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt'.



Source: [violnconvert03/iStock](#).

One thing the Egyptian kings were good at was propaganda, aimed at promoting themselves and their divine right to rule. They used picture writing known now as 'hieroglyphics' (from the Greek *hieros*, 'sacred', and *glyphein*, 'to carve') to record their heroic deeds on their statues and the pillars of their temples; and on the walls of their tombs they painted king lists to indicate their ancestry. Centuries later, in about 300 BCE, the Egyptian priest historian Manetho was able to use this information to devise a system of dynasties, to better understand the chronology of the kings of Egypt. He recorded thirty-one dynasties, from Narmer ('Menes'), whom he designated the founder of the First Dynasty, right through to the Greek conquest of Alexander in 332 BCE. Researchers reading the hieroglyphic propaganda of these

ancient kings need to be cautious about accepting their version of events. Kings were not averse to providing ‘alternative facts’, even to the extent of rubbing out the names of their predecessors and claiming heroic deeds for themselves.

Bearing this in mind, for the convenience of understanding the chronology of Egyptian history, it is customary to group the dynasties into three main periods: Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom, with Intermediate Periods in between when royal control broke down. The dates of the dynasties and the kingdoms are only approximate and may vary according to the calculations of different scholars.



For a concise ‘Timeline of Ancient Egyptian dynasties’, also incorporating the key features that define them, refer to the companion website for this book, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/timelines

Government and economy

Two features of Egyptian culture lasted throughout this long period. They featured in the First Dynasty and they underlaid all the power and the glory to come. These were the ruthless autocracy of the king and the exploitation of the common peasantry on whose unrelenting labour the whole fabric of society depended. The early kings had come to power through violence, and all their symbols of authority, from the mace to the sceptre, emphasised this fact. The king was not interested in the welfare of his subjects. Indeed, he treated them with contempt. He saw himself as a superhuman being, and he was just as likely to slaughter his own people as to smite his enemies.

Many leaders of early civilisations in Africa called on religion to support their right to rule. The kings of Egypt, however, did not *depend* on the gods for their power. In Egypt, the monarchy *was* the religion. In the words of the Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson: ‘in early Egypt, the kings *were* the gods’.¹ And aside from conquering his enemies, most of an Egyptian king’s preoccupation was with preparing his tomb, temple or monument for the afterlife with his fellow gods. Mummification had been a long tradition among the leaders of the desert peoples and, by the time of unification, it was a skill that the

Egyptians had perfected, although it was only reserved for the king and his retainers. The common people were not considered worthy of preservation after death. They were buried in a shallow scoop in the ground. The size of a king's mortuary temple and his tomb was intended both to overawe his subjects with his superhuman powers and to impress the gods with the importance of this new god who would be joining them in their journeys across the skies. Indeed, also buried in the tombs of the First Dynasty were the bodies of 'loyal retainers', killed on his death so that they could continue to serve their lord during his never-ending reign in the life to come. This practice was suspended after the First Dynasty. Wilkinson has suggested that perhaps it was considered wasteful of good talent.

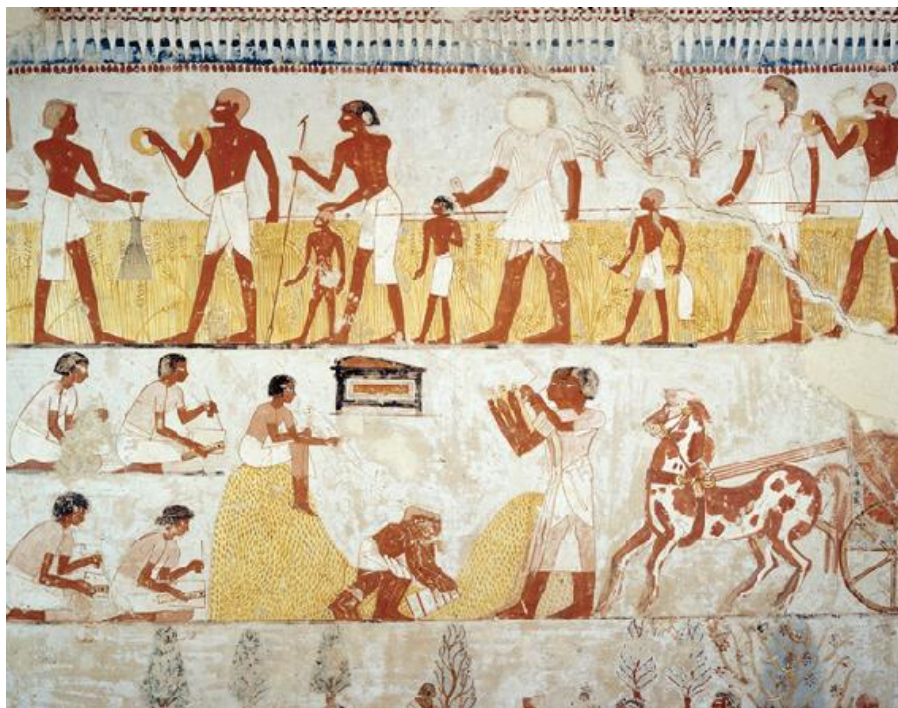
Unification brought stability to the kingdom. The first three dynasties covered a 400-year period, during which the means of ruling this 800-kilometre ribbon of country, from the first cataract to the Mediterranean, was laid down (see [Map 2.4](#)). The fertile soil of the floodplain was easily able to produce a surplus and this was appropriated by the king. It was on this surplus that the welfare and prosperity of the royal court depended. The easy navigation of the Nile and the fact that the population was hemmed in by the desert meant that nobody was beyond the control of the king's men. Local government was divided into forty-two *nomes* (provinces). These were based on traditional predynastic communities; although the *nomarch* (governor) was now answerable directly to the king.

The invention of hieroglyphics enabled the king to establish a centrally controlled command economy. All land was 'owned' by the king, and by the use of hieroglyphics, his scribes were able to dictate and record what crops were grown where and by whom.

The peasantry lived in small mud houses built on sandy mounds above the floodplain. They subsisted on a diet of bread, onions, beer and fish. Their main crops were wheat, barley and flax. They also grew a range of vegetables and fruit such as figs and grapes. They herded cattle and goats, kept geese, fished perch from the Nile and hunted wild birds in the marshes. But the peasants ate little meat. Nor were they allowed to keep more than the bare minimum of what they produced. Most of it was paid in taxes to the government. Some of the surplus grain was stored for emergency in huge regional granaries. The rest went to support the king and his lavish lifestyle.

Figure 2.7 Measuring and recording the harvest; an Eighteenth Dynasty wall painting from a tomb in Thebes. In the upper picture, note the line being used to measure the acreage. In the lower picture, the

scribes (*left and right*) record the amount of grain being scooped up by those in the centre.



Ancient Egypt: 3500–1000 bce



Early Dynastic Egypt and the Old Kingdom

The kings of the First Dynasty built their tombs of mud bricks at Abydos, a royal burial site since predynastic times. The first king of the Second Dynasty established a new burial ground at Saqqara, a little to the south of present-day Cairo and Giza, near the traditional dividing line between Upper and Lower Egypt. His tomb was cut into the solid rock, with corridors and rooms, just like a house for the living. By the end of the Second Dynasty, these tombs were being

lined with blocks of smooth-cut limestone and filled with the fruits of long-distance trade. Besides artefacts decorated with precious stones from the desert and gold from the mines of Nubia, these burial chambers contained cedar wood and tin from Lebanon. Cedar was for shipbuilding and tin was for combining with Egyptian copper to produce bronze, a much harder metal. Clearly, the Bronze Age had arrived in Egypt and the kings were on the road to building ever grander burial monuments.

Djoser (c.2650–2620 BCE), the first king of the Third Dynasty, commissioned a pyramid for his tomb. To suit the founder of a new dynasty, it would, of course, have to be the largest structure ever built. His architect Imhotep realised that a large and perfect pyramid required a huge weight of stone and great care would be needed to ensure that it did not sink through its foundations or collapse in on its internal burial chambers. He solved this problem by building his pyramid in five ‘steps’, each of decreasing size. The result was the Step Pyramid of Saqqara. The Pyramid Age had arrived.

The Pyramid Age

With Egypt’s cloudless skies and no modern light pollution, every night provided an incredible display of identifiable stars that we can only imagine today. Placed against a dark blue/black background stretching from horizon to horizon, the stars provided both a glimpse of the realm of the gods and an indelible basis for the development of astronomy and mathematics. Through their study of the sun, the moon and the stars, Egyptian astronomers developed the world’s first annual 12-month calendar of 365 days. And it was through the development of mathematics and the use of the stars to establish fixed points that the Ancient Egyptians were able to design and construct their pyramids with such incredible accuracy. Early pyramid building was a mixture of mathematical calculation and trial and error, and the mass organisation of tens of thousands of men.

By the time of the Fourth Dynasty, the principles for building the perfect pyramid had been mastered. Thus, Khufu (c.2545–2525 BCE), the second king of this dynasty, was able to order the construction of what was to become the largest man-made structure in the world, the Great Pyramid of Giza. It would not be surpassed in height until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris in 1889.

The first attempts by previous kings to build a perfect pyramid had angled each row of huge stone blocks slightly inwards to create a smooth outer surface; but this proved unstable and the pyramids sagged or collapsed. For the Great Pyramid, the blocks were placed

level with the ground, each successive row positioned slightly further in towards the centre. The resultant ‘steps’ all the way to the top were encased with triangular blocks of polished limestone to create a smooth white outer surface. It is only near the top of one of the Giza pyramids that some of these encasing stones can still be seen today.

It has been calculated that Khufu’s pyramid contains 2.3 million blocks of limestone. These were quarried from the edge of the Giza plateau. Each block weighed at least a ton. The hard blocks of granite used to line the interior burial chamber were sailed down the Nile from near the first cataract. While the project involved an élite class of specialists – surveyors, engineers and skilled stonemasons – the bulk of the heavy work of quarrying, hauling and placing the finished blocks was done by peasant labourers, forcibly recruited from villages on a rotational basis so that there was minimal disruption of the agricultural cycle. They were organised into a military-style hierarchy of teams, gangs and crews: no fewer than 4,000 men on site at any one time. Toiling ten hours a day, every day, it took them the full 20 years of Khufu’s reign to complete the work.

Figure 2.8 The pyramids of the Giza necropolis. The one on the right is the Great Pyramid of Khufu, the largest ever built. The one in the centre here is that of his younger son Khafra. Not only is it closer to the camera in this image, but it was deliberately built on slightly higher ground so as to give the impression that it was larger than that of his father, which in fact it was not – an example of Ancient Egyptian royal propaganda.



Djedefra ('Ra, he speaks'), Khufu's son and successor, declared the sun god Ra to be one of the most important gods. He built his pyramid near Memphis, a little to the south of Giza, but still within sight of it. He was succeeded by his younger brother Khafra who returned to Giza and built his pyramid on slightly higher ground so that it would appear to be larger than his father's. And to emphasise his power and godly importance, he built a temple nearby and in the interior great hall he placed 23 life-size statues of himself, each with the hawk god Horus on his neck. Not satisfied with that, he had stonemasons carve the Great Sphinx out of a nearby sandstone hill. It displayed his own face on the body of a huge recumbent lion. After Khafra, however, the enormous resources expended on these massive projects ensured that no other kings could ever attempt anything quite so large. Perhaps in order to recover the kingdom's wealth, the kings of the Fifth Dynasty extended their authority into Nubia as far as the second cataract to gain direct control of the region's gold mines. They also extended greater control over the mines and trade routes of the Eastern and Western Deserts and dominated the trade that passed through Palestine.

Figure 2.9 The Great Pyramid of Khufu (seen here on the left in the distance) was the largest of the pyramids. The later pyramid of his son Khafra is to the right (see [Figure 2.8](#) caption for more on these). The limestone facing that remains at the top once covered the whole of both pyramids. The sphinx (*centre*) is believed to have also been built

by Khafra, with the image of his own face on the body of a lion.



The end of the Old Kingdom

The unified kingdom founded by Narmer lasted for nearly 1,000 years. Over the centuries, however, foreign trade brought increasing wealth to the regional princes of the Nile valley and, from about 2300 BCE, they began to reassert the local powers that their predecessors had used to exercise before unification. A series of failed inundations led to famine and people lost faith in the power of the king. Central authority collapsed in all but name and the kingdom broke apart along regional lines. Historians refer to this as the end of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of an 'Intermediate Period'. Taxes were no longer paid to central government and the king's authority was weakened. Civil war broke out between the different regions, with several kings, in Upper and Lower Egypt, claiming the true inheritance of the dual kingdom. The Nubians of Kush reclaimed their kingdom as far as the first cataract. And for more than 100 years no pyramids were built in Egypt – the sure sign of a collapse in royal authority.

The Middle Kingdom

Thebes (modern Luxor) grew to prominence in the civil war period and it was from here that a king eventually arose who would restore the sacred unity of Egypt. His name was Mentuhotep II. His armies

crushed the rebellious province of the middle Nile that had seized control of the sacred burial place of Abydos. He then swept north to conquer the Delta kingdom of Lower Egypt.

Mentuhotep's reign, which lasted 50 years (c.2100–1960 BCE), marked the return of the absolute rule of divine kingship. He replaced regional governors with his own appointees, usually loyal Thebans, and they reimposed punitive levels of taxation, accompanied by a heavy security clampdown. Mentuhotep's successors reconquered Nubia as far as the second cataract, and they restored trading links with western Asia. High-value luxuries were imported for the benefit of the king, and gold, copper and precious stones were mined for turning into jewellery and statuettes. With all this wealth, the kings of the Middle Kingdom were able to restore the grandeur of Ancient Egypt. Their pyramids were smaller than those of the Old Kingdom. They preferred to emphasise the power and the glory of the king through building temples and grand statues of themselves.

The Middle Kingdom was an era of great craftsmanship in jewellery, statues and adornments. It also witnessed a flowering of literature. Hieroglyphic writing was no longer confined to taxation accounts and the praises of the king. Papyrus scrolls recorded poems and fables, and the stories and philosophical thoughts of ordinary people.

Subtle changes in religious belief emerged in this period. Previously, only the king was entitled to an afterlife; but during the Intermediate Period local leaders had claimed the right to an afterlife too and they built tombs for themselves. From these tentative beginnings the concept emerged during the Middle Kingdom of an afterlife for all – even commoners. The cult of Osiris arose at Abydos. Osiris, the ruler of the underworld, would preside over the day of final judgement, when the bad would be consumed by fire and the good refreshed with water. As these beliefs developed, it was to have a profound influence on later world religions. Indeed, sometime later in the Eighteenth Dynasty, Akhenaten briefly flirted with monotheism, but on his death the old religion reasserted itself and the traditional pantheon of the gods was restored.

Figure 2.10 Nubians carrying tribute to the pharaoh; a wall painting, c.1420 bce. At times, the Nubians of Kush were forced to acknowledge Egyptian power; at other times, they asserted their independence and then trading between the two was on more equal terms.



The kings of the Old and Middle Kingdom had never seen the need to maintain a standing army. They were protected by cataracts in the south and deserts to the east and west, and Egyptian control of the Nile valley remained unchallenged for nearly 1,500 years. This security came to an end in 1670 BCE when the Hyksos from western Asia crossed the Sinai Desert and invaded the Nile Delta. They swept into Lower Egypt, riding the most advanced weapon of the day – horse-drawn chariots. It came at a time of weakened kingship through a series of succession disputes and the unprepared Egyptians did not stand a chance. The Hyksos dominated the delta region for more than a century. In doing so, they cut off Upper Egypt from the wealth of foreign trade, thus further weakening the power of the Egyptian kings.

The kings of Upper Egypt, however, learned the lessons of the Hyksos invasion and established a standing army, equipped with chariots and weapons of bronze. In about 1540 BCE, the Theban kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty drove the Hyksos out of Lower Egypt and reunited the kingdom.

The New Kingdom

In the 'New Kingdom' period that followed (c.1540–1070 BCE), Egypt became a major world power. Backed by a standing army, the pharaohs of the New Kingdom were able to establish an empire, extending their rule by conquest into Palestine and Syria in the northeast and into Nubia as far as the fourth cataract in the south. It was during this period that King Thutmose III assumed the title of 'Pharaoh'. The capital was moved from Memphis in Lower Egypt to Thebes in the heart of Upper Egypt. Trade in ivory, gold, incense and hardwood was expanded, notably down the Red Sea to the 'Land of Punt' on the northeast coast of the Horn of Africa.

The building of massive statues and temples along the valley of the Nile symbolised the power and wealth of the New Kingdom pharaohs. They expanded the Karnak temple complex near Luxor that had been begun in the Middle Kingdom period. No other religious building in the world has ever surpassed it in size. Not content with that, they linked Karnak by an avenue of sphinxes to a huge new temple complex at Luxor, 1.5 kilometres to the south. In addition, temples, statues and funerary monuments were built on the plain to the west of the Nile at Thebes. Instead of building pyramid tombs, they carved their ornate burial chambers in the hills to the west of Thebes. Most of these tombs were robbed in ancient times, but in 1924 CE the complete tomb of Tutankhamun was uncovered. The magnificence of the gold artefacts packed into this tomb of a minor pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty can only give a hint of what would have been found in the robbed tombs of the great pharaohs, such as Ramesses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty.

There were a number of female 'kings' in the course of Egyptian history. They came to power initially by acting as regent for some underage male relative, but once in power, they ruled every bit as a full divine king. It was the female King Hatshepsut of the Eighteenth Dynasty who dispatched a large trading mission down the Red Sea to 'The Land of Punt'.

The Late Period

In time, Egypt's foreign ventures began to rebound. In the years after 1100 BCE, the empire was weakened and the New Kingdom brought to an end by attacks from outside: from across the desert in the west and the Mediterranean in the north. By 1050 BCE, Palestine and Nubia had broken free. Compared with the previous 2,000 years, this Late Period (1100–330 BCE) was a time of relative turmoil. Egypt suffered a succession of foreign invasions – Nubian, Assyrian and Persian – and Libyan-Berber mercenaries dominated the army. Foreign dynasties were founded, to be ousted by native Egyptian ones. In 728 BCE, the Nubian kings of Kush invaded Egypt during a time of weakness and established the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. They ruled as kings of Upper and Lower Egypt for 70 years until an Assyrian invasion drove them out of Lower Egypt. The Nubian king retired to Kush, between the second and fourth cataracts.

Figure 2.11 Tutankhamun's funeral mask in solid gold inlaid with semi-precious stones and glass paste; from the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun (Eighteenth Dynasty), discovered in 1924 in the Valley of the Kings, Thebes, Egypt.



There were periods of tranquillity and recovery, such as the Twenty-sixth Dynasty that expelled the Assyrians and restored the unity of Egypt. Pharaoh Necho of this dynasty (610–595 BCE) started work on a canal to link the Nile with the Red Sea, a work that was completed during the following, Persian, dynasty. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, writing nearly two centuries after the event, Necho despatched a fleet of ships down the Red Sea to sail around ‘Libya’ (Africa) to discover the size of the continent. Herodotus does not record whether they succeeded in their mission, and bearing

in mind that he tended to give equal weight to fable as to fact, the story of the circumnavigation must be treated with some scepticism.

Figure 2.12 The back of the gold-plated throne, showing Queen Ankhesenamun putting the finishing touches to the king's toilet; from Tutankhamun's tomb.



The last independent Egyptian dynasty fell to Greek conquest in 332 BCE. This brought Egypt into the empire of Alexander of Macedon (known in European history as 'Alexander the Great'). He gave control of the kingdom to his general Ptolemy. The Greek Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt until the death of Cleopatra and the Roman conquest of

The legacy

Many of Ancient Egypt's magnificent buildings fell into ruin over the centuries or were dismantled to be used in other building projects. Some were simply buried by the shifting sands of the desert. That leaves the principal legacy of 3,000 years of Egyptian history as the unbridled autocracy perfected by the kings and pharaohs whose rule was underpinned by the endless labour of a ruthlessly exploited peasantry. As we shall see in later chapters, little changed in Egypt in the two millennia to come; any challenge to this system being swiftly crushed.



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- 1T. Wilkinson (2010) *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* (Bloomsbury, London), p. 49.

SECTION 2



EARLY IRON AGE



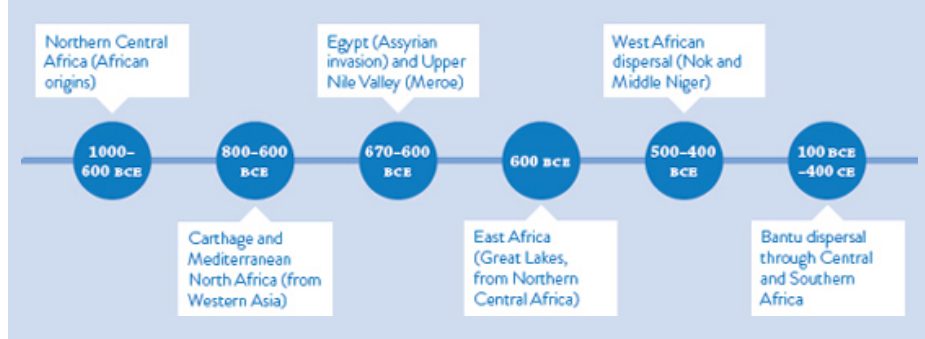
Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the spread and impact of ironworking in Africa. The introduction of this hard and infinitely malleable raw material enabled the more efficient production of food surpluses and the mining of minerals. This, in turn, led to a growth in trade and with it, in some areas, the growth of powerful states. Hitherto, sub-

Saharan Africans had lived in relative harmony with nature, and even with the coming of the Early Iron Age, their environmental footprint remained mostly modest. In the floodplain of the middle Niger (in the modern Republic of Mali), a collection of urban centres based on agricultural production managed to achieve a high level of interdependence without the domination of a state apparatus. In northeast Africa, however, the Iron Age gave rise to two states, Meroe and Aksum, which involved a concentration of population around a central point of control. With this level of population density, the people of these states moved into a new relationship with their environment. They were now in a position to dominate nature and shape it in their own interests. For many centuries they were highly successful, in terms of the wealth and power of their ruling class: Meroe lasted for 900 years and Aksum for 700. These were such long periods of relative stability that they probably did not realise, or were not willing to accept, the long-term damage they were causing to the environment. There are lessons here for our contemporary world.

Population density is limited by the ability of known technology to satisfy the basic needs of the people from the accessible environment. As populations grow within a thriving state, eventually a tipping point is reached and then, if the society cannot adapt, perhaps aided by new technology, it takes only a crisis of nature – drought, flood or disease – or the loss of a trading outlet for the society to collapse or disperse. In the case of Meroe, the state simply evaporated; while the Aksumites dispersed into the highland interior.

As we see in [Chapter 4](#), on the other hand, across most of sub-equatorial Africa, ironworking farmers exercised a continuum of dispersal, spreading in small groups into lightly populated land never previously cultivated. In doing so, they integrated with pre-existing populations and were able to maintain a harmonious relationship with their environment, leaving only a shallow footprint and the evidence of their smelting furnaces and shards of pottery. The development of Iron Age states in these regions came later, after continuous dispersal had reached its zenith. Then people began to compete for the best arable and grazing land, and rulers realised the potential of long-distance trading connections.

Timeline of Iron Age origins and spread in Africa



CHAPTER 3

The impact of iron in north and west Africa

The spread and impact of early metalworking

We saw in [Chapter 2](#) how the development of crop cultivation and pastoralism brought important changes to the way of life of many of the Stone Age peoples of Africa. These changes were quickened by the development and spread of the knowledge and techniques of metalworking.

Metal provided early human societies with a superior raw material for making their tools, weapons and decorative ornaments. Metal could be shaped, joined, sharpened and decorated in a far wider range of ways than stone. One of the first metals to be mined and worked was copper. It is relatively 'soft' and is sometimes found in pure metallic form. It would not, therefore, have been too difficult for Stone Age craftsmen to develop the techniques for heating, hammering and shaping it into their desired tools or ornaments. Most metals, however, including copper, are normally mined as ore, that is, metal-bearing rock. In due course, early craftsmen learned how to extract their metals from this ore through heating. By a process known

as 'smelting', copper or tin was, in effect, 'melted' from the rock. It was soon discovered that smelting copper and tin together produced a harder metal, an alloy we know as bronze. Bronze was used for making a wide variety of effective tools and weapons.

One of the earliest known sites for the mining of copper was Sinai, a small area in the northeastern corner of Egypt, which links Africa to western Asia. Early copper workings found in this region are thought to date as far back as 4000 BCE. Copper and bronze were widely used in Ancient Egypt.

Metal as an item of trade

Besides providing metalworking societies with a basic raw material for their own use, metals became an important item of trade in the ancient world. Copper, tin and other valuable metals such as lead and gold were only found in a limited number of places and thus were not widely available. Societies that controlled the mining or production of these metals controlled a potential source of wealth that could be exchanged for luxuries or raw materials with other neighbouring societies. Some metals were so much in demand and thus so valuable that they were exchanged from one group of people to another, over huge distances, sometimes ending up many thousands of kilometres from their original source. Gold was one such metal.

Gold is particularly rare and is even softer than copper, too soft and too rare for making useful tools. But it is easy to work and does not tarnish or lose its lustre with age. These qualities, combined with its relative scarcity, have ensured that, over the ages, gold has remained one of the most valuable and sought-after of metals. In Ancient Egyptian times, gold was mined in the Nubian mountains and taken down the Nile for trading with Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). It is thought that Egyptian control of this trade was one important source of the great wealth accumulated by the pharaohs. In Egypt itself, gold was widely used by the pharaohs' craftsmen for making fine burial goods for their tombs and jewellery for the nobility.

Copper in western Africa

During the New Kingdom period of Ancient Egypt, the use of bronze spread along the Mediterranean coastline of northern Africa. There is also evidence of early copper working in western Africa, in the Aïr Mountains of the southern Sahara. At Akjoujt in present-day Mauritania, copper was worked and traded to local stone-using peoples between 1000 and 500 BCE. There is similar evidence of early

copper smelting at Azelik and Agades in central Niger, where a number of copper objects such as spear points were used by otherwise Neolithic peoples. The skills of early copper working in western Africa may have evolved locally. But it remained on a small scale and appears not to have had any dramatic effect on the way of life of the predominantly stone-using peoples of the region.

Origins and spread of ironworking

The smelting of iron

The technique of iron smelting is complex and difficult to master. Iron is chemically infused within its ore and its extraction involves a chemical process rather than merely melting it from the rock. Early iron-smelting furnaces were of two basic types: a trench dug below the ground or a circular clay construction raised a metre or two in height (see [Figure 3.1](#)). Special clay pipes (*tuyéres*) were inserted in the sides of the furnace to aid the flow of air. Crushed ore and hardwood charcoal were layered in the furnace in just the right proportions, and flux such as lime (sometimes in the form of seashells) might be added to aid the smelting process. The fire was then lit, the furnace was sealed and air was pumped in through the *tuyéres* with the aid of bellows. The air was to raise the temperature within the furnace and to add oxygen as part of the chemical process.

After a number of hours of smelting, the furnace was broken open and the red-hot iron was raked out of the bottom. The crude iron needed to be frequently reheated and hammered to knock out its impurities and to prepare it for forging into useful weapons and tools. However, iron rusts easily and therefore few examples of iron tools and weapons have survived from very ancient times. Thus the main archaeological evidence for the early smelting of iron in Africa has often been the waste slag and clay *tuyéres* discarded from the smelting furnaces.

The advantages of iron

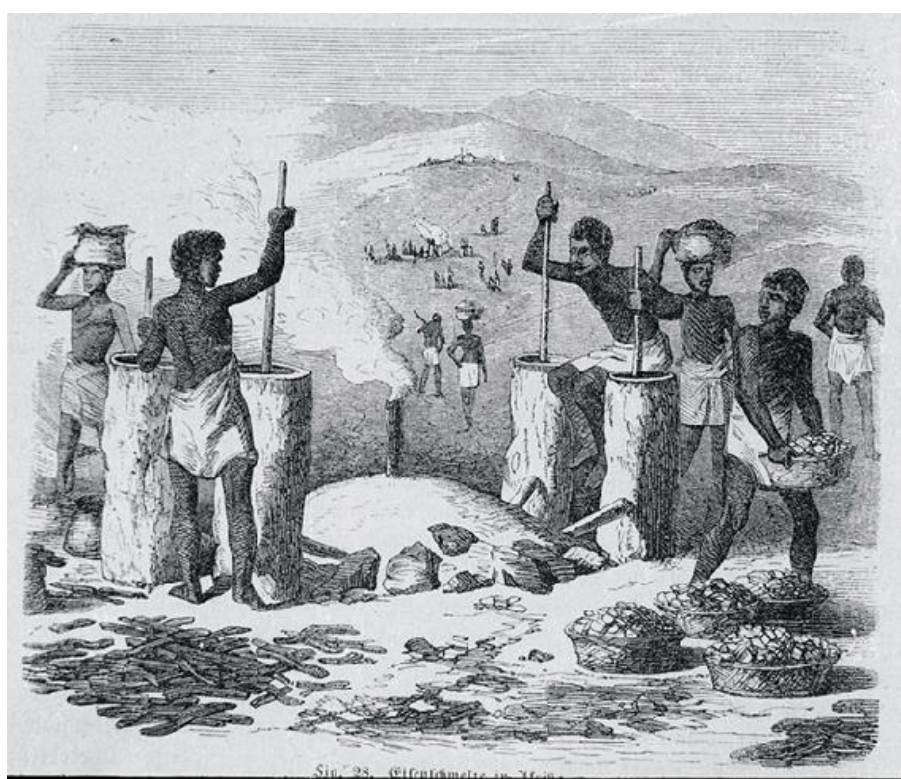
Although the smelting of iron is clearly a difficult and complex process, it produces, once mastered, tools and weapons that are far superior to those made of copper or bronze. It is a much harder metal and can be sharpened to a finer edge. In addition, iron ore is widely available through much of tropical Africa. Its one drawback is that the smelting of iron ore needs large quantities of hardwood charcoal. This required proximity to plentiful forest timber and could lead to serious

deforestation, which, as we shall see below in the case of Meroe, contributed to the collapse of a large-scale iron-smelting industry.

The origins of ironworking in Africa

Because of the specialised nature of iron smelting, it used to be assumed that its techniques could not have been independently ‘invented’ in more than one place in the ancient world. The oldest known ironworks anywhere in the world are to be found in Anatolia (modern Turkey) and have been dated to 1500 BCE. Western Asian knowledge of ironworking was not taken to Egypt until the Assyrian invasion of 670 BCE and for a long time it was assumed that it must have spread to the rest of Africa from there. This argument of ‘diffusion’ from only one source of invention is no longer widely accepted among African archaeologists and historians. We have already seen in [Chapter 2](#) that numerous peoples independently ‘invented’ the domestication of various plants and animals. Indeed, agriculture was independently ‘invented’ in regions as far away as the Hwang Ho valley in China from 5000 BCE and central America from 3000 BCE. Thus there is no reason to suppose that ancient Africans were not capable of using the techniques of smelting copper and independently applying them to the problem of smelting iron. Archaeological evidence that has come to light since the 1990s seems to confirm that this must indeed be what happened. There is evidence of the early smelting of iron from between 1000 BCE and 600 BCE in the region between Lake Chad and the Great Lakes of east Africa, long before the western Asian technology reached Egypt (see [Map 3.1](#)). The knowledge and skills of ironworking did not spread further through east Africa until the turn of the Common Era (see [Chapter 4](#)); but the knowledge spread westwards, along old copper-trading networks, to the peoples of the west African woodland regions south of the Sahara.

Figure 3.1 Iron smelting in nineteenth-century west Africa, using the traditional techniques developed during the Early and Later Iron Age. Note the size of the air pumps, which enabled the furnace to generate a very high temperature. African iron was reputed to be of the very highest quality. Wood engraving from *Buch der Erfindungen*, 1872.



Source: Bettmann/Getty Images.

The spread of ironworking in Africa



The Early Iron Age in west Africa

Unlike copper ore, iron ore is fairly widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa. All that was needed for the spread of ironworking was a knowledge of smelting technology. The woodland savannah of west Africa was ideal for this development. Not only did iron-tipped spears and arrows make hunting more efficient, but iron axes and hoes provided early farmers with a more efficient means of clearing woodland for cultivation. At the same time, the wood itself provided large quantities of charcoal. By 400 BCE, ironworking was becoming fairly widespread in the savannah woodlands of west Africa, and iron tools accelerated the spread of farming communities.

The floodplain of the middle Niger (the 'inland delta') produced a

particularly interesting form of urbanisation during this period. The existence of the Niger's seasonal floodplain in the dry grassland of the west African savannah attracted ironworking settlements from at least 400 BCE. The settlements began as villages raised on mounds within the complex network of river channels and backwater swamps that characterise the floodplain. The strength of these settlements lay in local specialisation, and their ability to adapt to the particular local circumstances of soil, rainfall and floodwater. They had at their disposal up to 42 varieties of African domesticated rice, besides sorghum, millet, cotton and livestock. These clusters of villages reached urban density by 400 CE, rising to a peak of urbanisation in about 750 CE. The largest settlement was Jenne-Jeno, in the southeast of the region. Some of these settlements contained highly skilled ironworkers. The export of rice and cotton enabled them to import iron ore that they smelted locally into a high-grade metal, akin to steel.

The unique feature of this urbanisation was its lack of hierarchical control. It had no overall ruler, no official state apparatus. The key to its success lay in local interdependence. Internal trade between many cooperating specialists ensured that the members of each local settlement satisfied their needs, enabling the wider urban system to work as a complex whole. The level of cooperation across this complexity of settlements went into decline after 1100 CE; some mound villages being abandoned and others becoming separate towns, but by then the informal unity of the whole had persisted for 1,500 years.

Meanwhile, on the Jos plateau of west Africa, north of the Niger-Benue confluence, ironworking was well established by 500 BCE. This centralised community is known to historians as the 'Nok culture', after the site near Taruga in central Nigeria where their artefacts were first discovered in 1928. The main items recovered from these sites have been a large number of beautifully constructed figurines of terracotta (baked clay) (see [Figure 3.2](#)). These represent human heads as well as elephants and other animals. There appear to be clear artistic links between the sculptures of the Nok culture and the later famous bronzes of Ife and Benin. There is evidence of fairly continuous occupation of this west African region from 'Stone Age' times right through to at least 200 CE. Thus the makers of the Nok terracottas were almost certainly descendants of previous Stone Age farmers who had added ironworking to their technology. Small terracotta bowls and cooking pots have also been recovered from the site, as well as some iron implements and the remains of smelting furnaces.

In the centuries that followed, up to 1000 CE, the use of iron gradually spread to all the regions of west Africa. During this period, there was a gradual rise in population and in some areas this led to the formation of large political units or states. The rise of the Kingdom of Ancient Ghana, which was part of this process, will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

The origins of iron in northeast Africa

In north and northeast Africa, the knowledge of ironworking appears to have spread from western Asia. The Hittites of Anatolia (modern Turkey), who had mastered the process by about 1500 BCE, made strenuous efforts to keep the technique a secret. In this way their unique iron weapons gave them military superiority over their neighbours. Gradually, however, the knowledge of iron smelting spread through western Asia.

A few iron goods began to appear in Egyptian burials in the centuries after 1000 BCE, but these were rare and probably imported. The main factor preventing the Egyptians from developing iron smelting for themselves was the country's chronic shortage of timber for charcoal. Bronze therefore continued to be the main metal for their tools and weapons until the Assyrian invasion of 670 BCE. The iron weapons of the Assyrians proved too much for the Egyptian army, which was quickly defeated. The Nubian rulers of the Twenty-fifth or 'Ethiopian' Dynasty were forced to withdraw their court to the Nubian region of the Upper Nile, south of the second cataract. There, in the centuries that followed, tropical Africa's first truly Iron Age state was to develop.

Figure 3.2 Terracotta sculpture of the ancient Nok culture of Nigeria (500 bce–200 ce). It is believed that the artistic concepts behind these sculptures were developed locally and went on to influence the later famous bronze sculptures of Ife and Benin.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

The Iron Age Kingdom of Meroe

Origins: the rise of Kush

A series of Nubian kingdoms had been established along the Upper Nile since before the unification of Ancient Egypt (3100 BCE). As we

saw in [Chapter 2](#), during Old Kingdom times, Egypt had imported gold, ivory, ostrich feathers and ebony from Nubia; but beyond that, very little is known about these early Nubian kingdoms. Middle Kingdom Egypt extended its boundary south to the second cataract in about 1900 BCE. The Nubians regrouped around a new capital at Kerma, just south of the third cataract. Soon after the beginning of the New Kingdom, however, in about 1500 BCE, direct Egyptian rule was extended deep into the Nubian heartland, beyond the fourth cataract. The aim was presumably to gain greater control over the region's trade. Egyptian towns and temples were built along this narrow ribbon of the fertile Nile. During the 500 years of direct Egyptian rule, the local Nubian ruling class adopted many aspects of Egyptian culture, including their religion, language and writing.

With the decline of Egypt, following the fall of the New Kingdom dynasties, Egyptian administration was withdrawn from Nubia. Thus, from about 1100 BCE, local Nubian rulers were able to reassert their culture and independence. They built a new religious and political capital at Napata, near the fourth cataract. The new Nubian state was known to Egyptians as the Kingdom of Kush. This region from the third cataract southwards lay beyond the zone of the Nile floodplain and fell within the area of tropical summer rainfall. Kush's agricultural economy was therefore based on the cultivation of sorghum and millet and the grazing of cattle, away from the immediate vicinity of the Nile.

The rulers of Kush were still largely Egyptian in culture and their state was modelled on Egyptian lines. They expanded trade with Egypt and their kings gained steadily in wealth and power. Indeed, they regarded themselves as the true guardians of the kingdom of Upper Egypt. When, in 730 BCE, Egyptian royal power was in a state of collapse, the king of Kush invaded Egypt and seized control of the kingdom at Thebes. A line of Kushite kings ruled this united kingdom of Upper and Lower Egypt for more than 60 years; they were recognised in Egyptian history as the Twenty-fifth or 'Ethiopian' Dynasty. They were, however, so thoroughly Egyptianised that they brought no significant cultural change to Egypt. They wore the traditional double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, worshipped Egyptian gods and had their names inscribed on Egyptian temples.

Following the Assyrian invasion of Lower Egypt in 670 BCE, the Kushite court withdrew to Nubia and did not return to Egypt. Instead, they built a powerful and independent kingdom south of the second cataract.

The move to Meroe

Centred first at Napata near the fourth cataract, the kingdom soon shifted its administrative centre to the southern provincial town of Meroe. This may have occurred initially because of the threat of Egyptian invasion. In 593 BCE, an Egyptian raiding army penetrated as far as the fourth cataract and sacked the town of Napata.

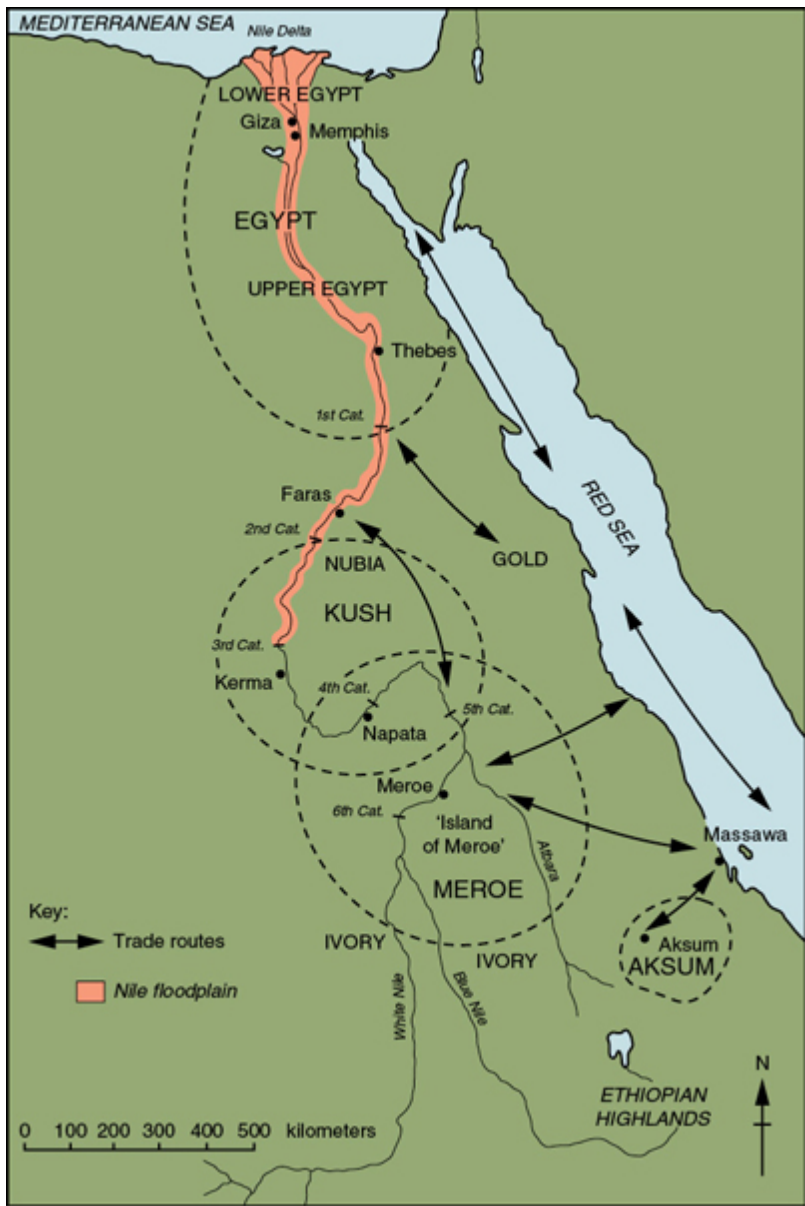
The 'island of Meroe', between the Nile and Atbara, had a number of distinct economic advantages. In the first place, the land surrounding Meroe was rich in both iron ore and the hardwood timber needed for making charcoal. Following their chastening experience with the Assyrians, the Kushites were determined that their new Kingdom of Meroe would be built on the production and use of iron. Besides improving their weapons of defence, iron provided the Meroites with spears and arrows for hunting. As we shall see shortly, the products of hunting formed an important part of the Meroitic economy. Iron also provided the Meroites with axes for cutting timber and clearing agricultural land and hoes for ploughing the soil.

Another economic advantage of the southern region of Meroe was its potential for extensive rainfed agriculture. In the Egyptian floodplain of the lower Nile, land clearance and ploughing were not a problem, so the development of iron tools had not been a necessity. But in the Nubian section of the Nile above the second cataract, the valley was much narrower and the extent of cultivable floodplain was therefore very small. It soon became apparent at Napata that there was hardly enough agricultural land to support a large urban population. The 'island of Meroe', on the other hand, fell well within the region of tropical summer rainfall. Here, it was possible to grow the tropical cereals sorghum and millet and to extend their cultivation away from the immediate region of the river. And in the plains to the east and west, cattle and other livestock could be grazed. Thus, with the help of their iron tools, the people of Meroe were able to develop a mixed farming economy.

Finally, the southern town of Meroe was in a good position for the further development of trade. North of the fifth cataract trading parties *en route* to Egypt could strike out northwards across the desert to rejoin the Nile near the modern town of Faras (see [Map 3.2](#)). By taking this shorter route, they were able to avoid the perils of the third and second cataracts and sail down the navigable Nile as far as the first cataract and the border with Egypt. In addition, when relations with Egypt became strained, as they did from time to time, Meroe had the further advantage of a trading outlet to the Red Sea. During the centuries of Greek and Roman rule in Egypt, the Red Sea increased in importance as a major trading artery between the

Mediterranean, India and the Far East. By exporting its traditional products of ivory, leopard skins, ostrich feathers, ebony and gold, the tropical African Kingdom of Meroe gained direct access to this expanding trade. It is no coincidence that the period of Greek and Roman prosperity saw the Kingdom of Meroe reach the height of its wealth and power.

Egypt, Kush and Meroe: 1500 bce to 350 ce



The development of a Meroitic culture

Initially, the culture, language, writing and religion of the rulers of Meroe was highly Egyptianised in character. Indeed, like the kings of Kush, the early rulers of Meroe still called themselves kings of Upper and Lower Egypt centuries after they had ceased to rule in Egypt. Egyptian was the official language of government, and inscriptions were in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Egyptian gods were worshipped in Meroe's temples, and pyramids were built over the tombs of their

rulers.

Gradually, however, local indigenous influences came to the fore, and Meroe developed its own distinctive cultural forms. A local language, referred to by historians as 'Meroitic', came to replace Egyptian as the spoken language of the court. Hieroglyphics were adapted to this local language and in due course a flowing alphabetic-type script was developed. Unfortunately, since the Meroitic language is not known today, its distinctive script has not yet been deciphered.

In their religion, the Meroites retained Egyptian gods, especially Amun, but added their own local gods and shrines. The most important Meroitic addition was Apedemek, the lion god. The ruins of the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es Sufra, a little to the south of Meroe, are still visible to this day. Statues and engravings of Apedemek usually portrayed him with a lion's head on the body of a snake or on the body of a man (see [Figure 3.3](#)). There was even one particular shrine at which the priests kept a number of live lions as symbols of the living god. The priests of Meroe's shrines were a rich and powerful force in the kingdom. Indeed, for centuries after the capital was moved to the south, all new kings or queens of Meroe had to present themselves to the priests of the temples of Napata to obtain the official approval of the gods.

The art and architecture of Meroe similarly developed their own particular character. Prominent in Meroitic art forms were pictures, engravings or statues of tropical African animals such as lion, ostrich, giraffe and elephant. They produced two classes of pottery: fine, painted luxury ware, turned on a wheel; and a heavier, handmade domestic ware, for regular cooking and storage. The former was based on Egyptian shape and design but was clearly locally made and decorated in distinctive Meroitic style (see [Figure 3.4](#)). The latter seems to have been based on an earlier Nubian tradition. Their pyramids also had a distinctly Meroitic style (see [Figure 3.5](#)); they were small, unpointed and regular in shape and size, quite unlike the royal tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs. Moreover, they first appeared in Meroe several centuries after pyramid building had ceased in Ancient Egypt.

The economic and political organisation of Meroe

The Kingdom of Meroe was economically and politically quite distinct from that of Egypt. As we have already seen, living just within the northern boundary of the summer rainfall zone, the Meroites could grow their tropical cereals in extensive fields away from the river's edge. This pattern of agricultural production influenced the social and

political organisation of Meroitic society.

The cattle herders and peasant cultivators, who made up the vast majority of Meroe's population, were spread out over a wide area. They lived in mud and reed houses, clustered in small rural villages, ruled over by minor chiefs and heads of family clans. As such, they appear to have been under less direct political control than their counterparts in the floodplain regions of the Egyptian Nile. They probably paid their taxes in the form of an annual tribute to the king rather than through the kind of detailed pre-assessed taxation demanded by Egyptian government officials. Cattle were grazed over a wide savannah grassland to the east and west of Meroe. Herdsmen were semi-nomadic, moving their animals between summer and winter pastures. They probably had a fair degree of political freedom from central government control, provided they paid an annual tribute in livestock.

The rulers, their government officials and full-time craftsmen, lived in the towns, of which the principal one was Meroe itself. Politically, the king ruled as an all-powerful, absolute monarch, but there appears to have been a greater element of consent by the people than ever existed in Ancient Egypt. Although the choice of monarch came from within a single royal family, succession was not automatic. It required the agreement of the nobility and, as already noted, the final approval of the priesthood. An unpopular monarch was occasionally removed. The mother of the king was also an important figure in the government, which may have helped maintain stability and continuity from one reign to the next.

Figure 3.3 Facsimile of an inscribed votive tablet of red slate from the Lion Temple at Naga. It depicts a king of Kush dressed in a long robe making offerings to the lion-headed god Apedemek. The inscription is in Meroitic. Second century bce.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

Figure 3.4 Engraving of a rural scene from the rim of a Meroite copper bowl illustrating the importance of pastoralism within the Meroite economy. One of the figures appears to be paying tribute to a ruler. The woven basket he is presenting probably contains soured milk, a form of yoghurt that was a major part of the pastoralists' diet.



Source: © Thames and Hudson Ltd. Reproduced with permission from *Meroe: A Civilisation of the Sudan* (1967) by P.L. Shinnie.

Figure 3.5 The pyramids of the Meroitic kings and queens in the north cemetery, Meroe, on a ridge overlooking the ruins of the city, 300 bce–400 ce. Although much

smaller than their Ancient Egyptian counterparts, the pyramids of Meroe had their own distinctive features and continued to be used to mark royal burials for more than 1,000 years after they had ceased to be constructed in Egypt.



Source: © mg81/iStock Photo.

The personal wealth of the Meroitic kings came from their control of trade. The main exports from the kingdom were the products of mining and hunting. Both of these activities came under the direct control of the king. Hunting expeditions, armed with iron weapons, penetrated deep into the grasslands and woodlands to the south in search of elephants, ostriches and leopards. The hunters formed the basis of a standing army, and elephants were used in war. Indeed, trained elephants from Meroe were exported to Egypt for use in the Egyptian army.

The principal industrial craft in Meroe was the smelting of iron and the making of iron tools. To this day, the huge mounds of waste slag from their smelting furnaces rise up alongside the modern railway to bear witness to the enormous iron output of the ancient Kingdom of Meroe. The development and use of iron was thus partly responsible for the very success, growth and wealth of the Meroite kingdom.

The rise and decline of the Kingdom of Meroe

During the final century before the Common Era (CE), the kings of Meroe expanded their rule into Lower Nubia between the first and second cataracts. This led to clashes with the Roman rulers of Egypt. A

Meroite army attacked the border town of Syene in 23 BCE and destroyed or seized a number of statues and other valuables. A bronze head of the Roman Emperor Augustus, probably seized in this raid, was discovered by archaeologists at Meroe in 1912. The Meroite raid provoked a Roman counterattack, which penetrated as far as Napata and caused much destruction. When the Roman army finally retired to Egypt, they took with them several thousand captives whom they sold into slavery. Despite this military setback, under the leadership of King Netekamani, who ruled from 12 BCE to 12 CE, the Meroite kingdom recovered to reach the height of its power and artistic achievement. During Netekamani's reign, the kingdom stretched from the Ethiopian foothills in the south to the first cataract in the north. The wealth of the period was displayed in the building of temples and palaces. Over the next two centuries, relations with the Roman rulers of Egypt were normally cordial and Meroe contributed to the Roman expansion of trade through the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean.

The Kingdom of Meroe came to an end sometime after 300 CE. Royal burials ended soon after that date, and sometime between 300 and 350 CE the town of Meroe was abandoned. A number of factors seem to have been responsible for the collapse of the kingdom. The former power of Meroe had been built on the strength of its iron industry and agricultural base and the wealth of its foreign trade. Between 200 and 300 CE, Meroe gradually lost the benefit of both these advantages. The agricultural base declined as the environment became worn out through overexploitation. The mounds of waste slag suggest the huge scale of the former smelting industry, and this would have consumed huge quantities of charcoal. Trees were cut down faster than new ones could grow. This led to erosion and loss of topsoil. The land, which had supported a thriving agricultural population for over 1,000 years, lost its former fertility.

In addition, Meroe lost its advantageous trade position. With its trade closely tied to the wealth of Roman Egypt, there was less demand for Meroe's luxury goods when Roman wealth declined. At the same time, Meroe's Red Sea trade to the Indian Ocean was lost to her better placed neighbour, the Kingdom of Aksum. In about 350 CE, the army of the Aksumite King Ezana invaded the 'island of Meroe'. By then the capital had already been abandoned and the region was in the hands of a people whom the Aksumites referred to as the 'Noba'. It is not known exactly who the Noba were. They may have been an invading group of pastoralists from the south or southwest. On the other hand, they may have been a subject Nubian people who regained control of the region when the power of their Meroite rulers collapsed.

The origins and rise of Aksum

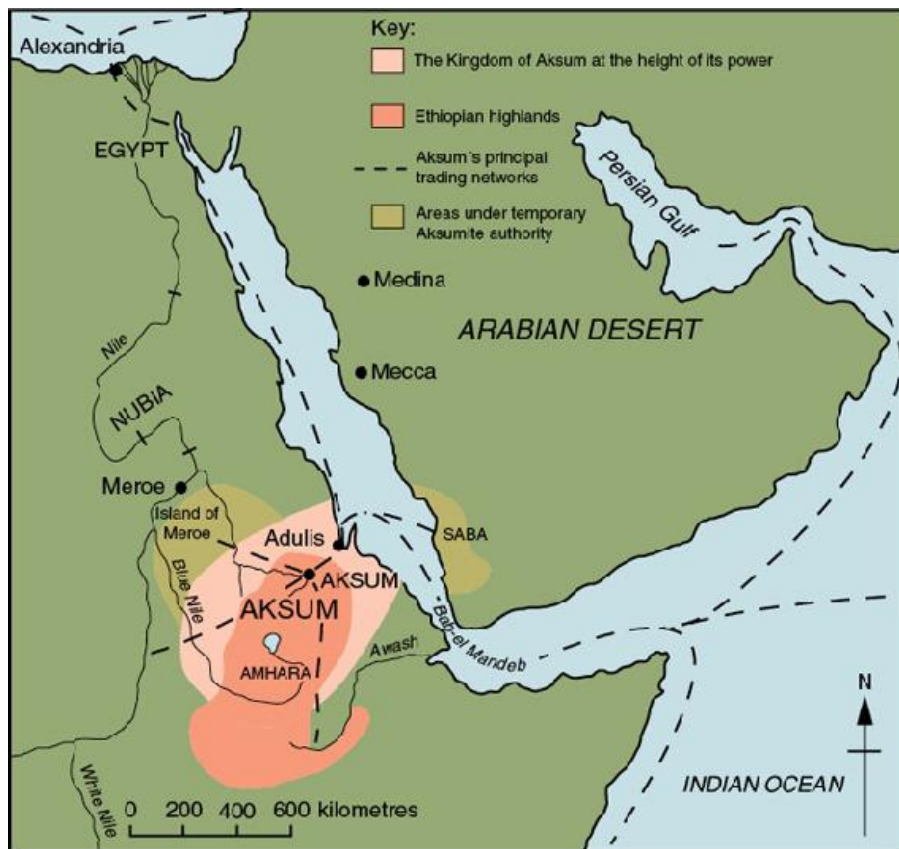
Origins

As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), mixed farming in the highland border regions of northern Ethiopia, Tigray, Eritrea and eastern Sudan had been well established by local Afro-Asiatic-speaking people since at least 3000 BCE. Although the majority probably still lived in scattered homesteads, by 1000 BCE they had formed a number of small centralised settlements. The leaders or rulers of these emerging chiefdoms probably benefited from trade connections with Ancient Egypt, to whose merchants the region was known as ‘the Land of Punt’. Traders of ‘Punt’ exported gold, timber, perfume oils and animal skins to Egypt via the Red Sea. Important burials in these Ethiopian chiefdoms were indicated by raised stone markers and some of their houses were constructed of stone, with timber-framed roofs. With the rise to power of the Nilotic kingdoms of first Kush and later Meroe after 1000 BCE, the trade of ‘Punt’ declined in importance.

Sometime during the sixth century BCE, hunters and traders began crossing the Red Sea from Saba (modern Yemen) in southwestern Arabia. They set up small trading settlements on the Eritrean coast. In their mountainous corner of Arabia, the Sabaeans-speaking people had already developed the skills of terracing and irrigation that enabled them to farm in that largely desert peninsula. They had also learned to take full advantage of their strategic trading position between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It was largely in search of ivory for the Persian and Indian trade that they crossed the Red Sea to northeast Africa. As skilled agriculturalists, they soon realised the potential of the fertile valleys and foothills of Tigray and Amhara. By at least 500 BCE, their hunting and trading settlements had expanded into colonies as they mixed and intermarried with the local population. In time, their Sabaeans language gave way to a locally evolved Ge’ez, from which the modern Amharic of Ethiopia is descended. They were already a literate people and they developed their own Ge’ez script.

Although mainly based inland, these Ge’ez-speaking people developed a thriving sea port at Adulis. They took full advantage of the expansion of Red Sea trade that followed the Greek colonisation of Egypt. Indeed, it was traders from Saba and Adulis who carried much of the Greek trade through the Bab el-Mandeb strait to the ports of the Indian Ocean. From there they returned with the luxury silks, muslins and spices of the East.

The Kingdom of Aksum, 100–700 ce



By the first century CE, the Ge'ez-speaking farmers and traders of northeast Africa had developed their own powerful state, based inland at Aksum and politically quite independent of Arabia. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (mid-first century CE), the Greek shipping manual, reported that Aksum's Red Sea port of Adulis had become the most important ivory market in the whole of northeast Africa. It is clear from this that Aksum was already wresting the African ivory trade away from the interior Kingdom of Meroe.

The rise of Aksum

Archaeological research has revealed that by the third and fourth centuries CE there was considerable prosperity at Aksum. The rulers were importing silver, gold, olive oil and wine. Their principal export was ivory and possibly also captives to sell as slaves. By 300 CE, they had started minting their own coinage, which was a great aid to trading transactions at Adulis. This would have given them a further

advantage over their Meroite neighbours, who never developed a coinage. Craftsmen at Aksum also manufactured luxury goods of glass crystal, brass and copper for export to Egypt and the eastern Roman Empire. Other important exports to the Greek and Roman world were frankincense, used in burials, and myrrh, which had important medicinal properties. Both these highly valued products were obtained from the resin of particular trees that grew mainly in the mountainous regions of Aksum and southwest Arabia.

The concept of stone buildings and burial monuments was already known to pre-Sabaeans Ethiopians. However, the original Sabaeans settlers introduced the practice of building with stone on a massive scale and in particular detailed carving on stone. The combination of the two traditions produced a unique Aksumite monument culture. They built temples, palaces and tombs for the wealthy ruling classes. Among their most impressive stone buildings were huge monuments, some of which still stand to this day. Known to us as 'stelae', these tall, thin monuments of solid stone marked the tombs of their rulers and are thought to date from about 300 CE. They were carved in the unique form of a very narrow, many-storied house (see [Figure 3.6](#)). The tallest stele, which has since fallen down, was made of 700 tonnes of rock and would have stood 33 metres in height.

In the fourth century CE, Christian scholars from Alexandria brought Christianity to Aksum. The Aksumite King Ezana (320–50 CE) adopted Christianity towards the end of his reign. It is thought that he may have been influenced by his desire to cement trading relations with the Christian, Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. The influence of the Greek connection at this time is shown by the inclusion of Greek inscriptions alongside those in Ge'ez on the Aksumite monuments of the period. It was certainly a time of great prosperity and expansion for Aksum, and it was the army of King Ezana that invaded the 'island of Meroe' in about 350 CE. Two centuries later, at about the time that Nubia was undergoing conversion to Christianity, Monophysite monks from Syria also reached Aksum. Their monastic tradition was soon incorporated into the distinctive Aksumite Christian Church.

Within the Aksumite state, the king exercised direct power in the central region based around the capital. Beyond this centre, regional rulers paid tribute to the king, probably along the lines of earlier pre-Aksumite chiefdoms. The king's main wealth and power came from his control of foreign trade. At Adulis, his officials levied taxes on all imports and exports. Apart from foreign trade, centred on Adulis, the economic basis of the state was its irrigated and terraced agriculture. Little is known about the relationship between the peasant farmers

and the state, although we do know that at times of weakness at the centre, a not uncommon occurrence caused by dynastic dispute or fluctuation in trade, the provinces were liable to assert their independence by refusing to pay tribute.

Figure 3.6 The tallest of the still-erect stelae at Aksum. These 'multistorey' structures, carved out of a single block of solid stone, were erected over the burial chambers of the kings of Aksum.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Getty Images.

The decline of Aksum

For a while in the sixth century, Aksum was powerful enough to

expand across the Red Sea to enclose the region of Saba (modern Yemen) within its borders. But, by the end of the century, they had been expelled from the Arabian Peninsula by their great rivals in trade, the Persians. The rise of Islam and its rapid spread across western Asia and northern Africa in the seventh century further weakened the trading position of Aksum. Much of the trade between the Indian Ocean and the eastern Mediterranean now passed through the Persian Gulf rather than the Red Sea.

The decline of Aksum in the eighth century may have been largely to do with their loss of trade to the Persians and Arabs. But, as with Meroe, it is also likely to have been related to the deterioration of the environment. Again, this was the result of the long-term cutting down of trees and overexploitation of the soil, leading to the kind of erosion so typical of the region today. Although Aksum itself remained an important symbolic and religious site, by 800 CE, the political capital of the much-reduced kingdom had been moved further south, into the central highland region of the Ethiopian interior. In theory, the kingdom's rulers still laid claim to the coastal region of Adulis. But the importance of external trade declined and the state developed in greater isolation as a highland agricultural community ruled over by a landed aristocracy. Greek and Arab influence was weakened and in the isolation of the highlands, the distinctly African Christian culture of Ethiopia came to the fore.

Iron Age north Africa and early trans-Saharan trade

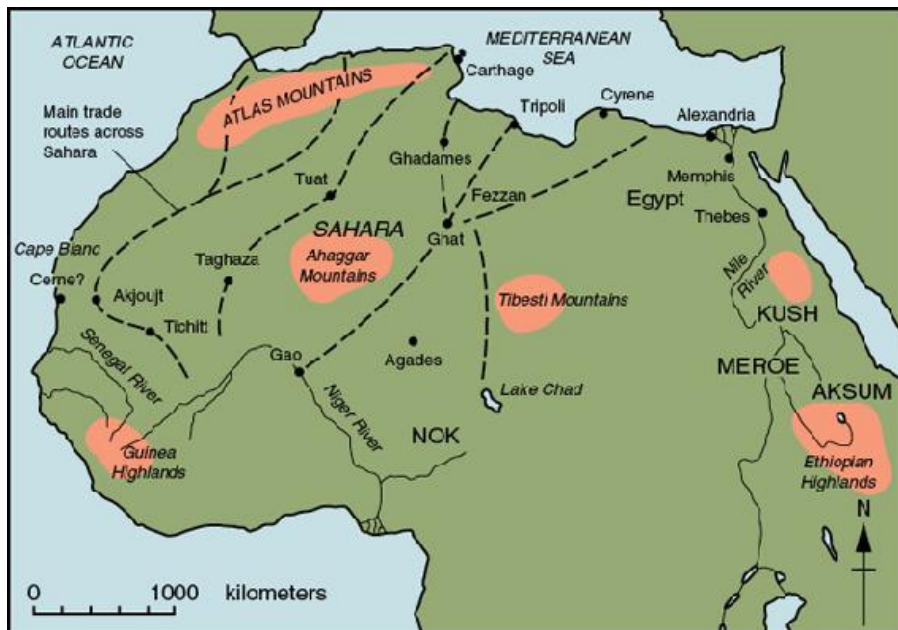
Phoenicians in north Africa

The Phoenicians were a seafaring people who originated from the region of present-day Lebanon. From about 1000 BCE, the iron-using Phoenicians built their wealth on the trade of the coastal region of the Mediterranean. In their search for valuable metals such as gold, copper, silver and lead, they penetrated the western Mediterranean and established a string of trading stations along the north African coast. By 800 BCE, they had turned their principal settlements into colonies, which, in due course, became virtually independent of the homeland of Phoenicia. The most famous of these was the colony of Carthage in modern Tunisia (see [Map 3.4](#)).

At Carthage, the Phoenicians settled among the bronze-using Berbers of north Africa. In the Tunisian plains and the Algerian coastal lowlands, the Berbers were settled agriculturalists who supplied the Phoenician towns with food. In exchange, the Phoenicians introduced

them to ironworking. In time, the Phoenicians, now 'Carthaginians', mixed with the Berbers to become an intricate part of north African culture. Carthage became a base for further trading and exploration along the Atlantic coast of northwest Africa. Their furthest settlement south, reached by about 400 BCE, was at a place called Cerne, believed to have been on the Mauritanian coast south of Cape Blanc.

Early trans-Saharan trade routes, up to 300 ce



Early trans-Saharan trade

By 600 BCE, the Phoenician colony of Carthage had become a major power in the western Mediterranean. Part of their wealth was built on trade in tropical African products from across the Sahara. The Phoenicians themselves did not conduct this trade. They relied on Berber pastoralists of the Atlas Mountains and northern Sahara to act as intermediaries. The Berbers had long maintained tentative contact across the Sahara, possibly dating back to a time before it became a desert (see [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#)). Small settlements of desert-dwelling Berbers still clung to isolated oases, the natural wells of the desert. Communication between one group and another was maintained along certain lines of oases, stretching right across the Sahara. Thus trading contacts at this time were not directly across the desert but

occurred by passing goods from one oasis to another. The main desert item traded to the south was salt, in exchange perhaps for food. But, gradually, highly valuable trading items such as copper and gold were passed across the desert from tropical west Africa to the coastal dwellers in the north. The early trade routes across the Sahara are shown in [Map 3.4](#).

The rise of Carthage between 800 and 500 BCE provided a strong stimulus for the further development of trans-Saharan networks. The extent of these networks is revealed in a remarkable series of rock paintings at various sites across the Sahara ([Figure 3.7](#)). The paintings depict two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariots and for a time it was assumed that this was proof that wheeled vehicles were driven right across the Sahara, providing direct transport from one side of the desert to the other. It is now realised that this was not possible. First, centuries of history have shown that horse-drawn wheeled vehicles would not have been able to negotiate the loose sands of the desert. Second, careful study of the detail of the paintings has revealed that they depict the ‘racing chariots’ used for sport by wealthy people in the Mediterranean towns of north Africa. These were minimal in construction, built for speed and with no room for carrying any baggage. The chariot paintings do show that there was plenty of communication between north Africa and Saharan oases. Trade, however, was carried by pack animals, probably donkeys, mules and horses. The Arabian camel was not widely used in north Africa until the first century CE and its impact will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

Figure 3.7 A Saharan rock painting of a racing chariot pulled by two horses. Chariots such as this were used for racing in Mediterranean north Africa, and not for transporting goods across the Sahara, as previously thought.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Getty Images.

Trade across the Sahara in this early period was a dangerous and hazardous undertaking. Apart from the obvious environmental problems and the dangers of not reaching the next oasis before water supplies ran out, traders were exposed to raids. People known as ‘Garamantes’, who lived in the Fezzan, were notorious for their raiding. They carried out raids not only on trading caravans, but also on the oases and peoples of the south in the direction of Lake Chad. Captives taken in these raids were used for mining salt in the Sahara or were transported and sold into slavery in north Africa. Slavery was a feature of trans-Saharan trade from its earliest beginnings. The main currency of trade, however, remained salt from the central Sahara. In addition, cloth, beads and metal goods from north Africa were exchanged for west African gold and ivory, as well as captives for sale into slavery.



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CHAPTER 4

The Early Iron Age in central, eastern and southern Africa

Evidence for the spread of ironworking

By the fifth century CE, the knowledge and skills of ironworking and crop cultivation had been established right across the more favourable regions of central, eastern and southern Africa. The relatively rapid spread of ironworking to this vast region is generally believed to have been the work of small farming communities who spoke early forms of the Bantu family of languages. Historians have reached these conclusions by marrying the evidence of linguists with that of archaeologists. Little, however, remains definite. Ongoing research continually reveals new evidence about the possible origins, nature, timing, direction and impact of 'Early Iron Age' farming. Thus, as old theories are refined or new theories proposed, the spread of the Early Iron Age by Bantu-speaking farmers remains one of the great debates of African prehistory.



The origins of the Bantu language family and its implications for the development of the wider Iron Age remain a topic of historical debate. We address this debate in more detail in 'Bantu Migration Early Iron Age' on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

Linguistic evidence: the Bantu speakers

All living languages are constantly changing and developing. In the days before the rapid and easy communications of the modern world, when one group of people moved away from another, they might well lose all regular contact. Although they started with a common language, their languages would develop separately and in different ways. At first, each group would form its own dialect, developing its own pronunciation and picking up or devising new words to suit changing circumstances. If, in their new territory, members of the group came into contact with other peoples and absorbed them into their society, this would bring further changes to their language. Finally, after the changes of many generations, the people of one group would no longer readily understand the language of the other. By then, a new language could be said to have developed, although, stemming from a common parent language, they both belonged to the same basic language ‘family’.

Linguists who study the features that various languages have in common are able to trace a family of languages back to their original parent. Having established a language ‘genealogy’, or family tree, they can then demonstrate the development of its branches and therefore, potentially, *the movement of people* away from the original language heartland. As more linguistic evidence becomes available, this movement is now being demonstrated with increasing accuracy for the Bantu family of languages.

‘Bantu’ is the name that modern linguists have devised for a particular family of African languages belonging to the wider Niger-Congo group that stretches across so much of sub-Saharan Africa. The word stem *ntu*, or something very similar to it, is common to the languages of this family. It means ‘person’. The prefix *ba-*, again common to most of these languages, denotes plural and so *ba-ntu* means literally ‘people’. As can be seen from [Map 4.1](#), the Bantu family is geographically the most widespread in the Niger-Congo group. But it should be stressed that the word ‘Bantu’ is not the actual name of any one language or people as such.

There are some 450 known languages in the Bantu family, from Kikongo and Gigikuyu in the north to Setswana and Isixhosa in the south. The original ancestor or ‘parent’ Bantu (referred to by linguists as proto-Bantu) is thought to have evolved in the region of present-day Cameroon. From there, it is believed to have spread eastwards round the northern edge of the Congo forest and southwards through the forest to the savannah woodlands beyond. We shall return to the further spread of Bantu speakers later in this chapter.

The languages of Africa, c.1600 ce



Archaeological evidence: smelters, potters and farmers

The main source of evidence for the development and spread of ironworking comes from archaeological sites. Radiocarbon and other scientific methods of dating ancient materials have made possible an ever-more-accurate dating of Iron Age settlements. The most useful materials for dating are the charcoal and waste slag associated with iron smelting. Another important source of evidence is pottery.

Farming and pastoral communities need pots for carrying and storing milk and water and for cooking food, especially the porridge made from dried and pounded cereals. Thus, the presence of

fragments of broken clay pottery in an archaeological site is often, although not necessarily, an indication of a settled farming community. Iron Age farmers became skilled makers of baked-clay pottery. Their craftsmanship was so highly valued that they decorated their pots with carefully shaped grooves and regular stamped patterns, as a sort of cultural signature or trademark. Their aim was to make the pot beautiful and the patterns adopted were dictated by local custom. The result was that related groups of people used similar styles and methods of pottery decoration. So, the methods, shapes and styles of manufacture and patterning have enabled archaeologists to identify groups of people who were probably in some way linked or associated with each other. To some extent also, differing styles of pottery can be used to help date a variety of apparently linked archaeological sites.

At the same time, archaeologists must be careful not to assume that different styles of pottery were necessarily made by culturally different people. For instance, recent evidence from the small island of Corisco off the coast of Gabon has revealed two different styles of pottery in the one settlement area, both dated to the same period. It is highly unlikely that two different cultural groups would coexist in such a small confined space, each retaining their distinctive traditions. The conclusion drawn instead is that one style of lightly fired pottery, unlikely to survive regular daily use, was used for burial purposes and the other hard-fired, strong, and differently decorated pottery was for daily domestic use, including cooking. The example of Corisco Island illustrates the complexity of social artefacts and traditions and the caution with which all archaeological evidence must be treated.

The archaeological evidence for farming is not always direct. It is seldom that actual cultivated grains have survived the passage of time. But farming can be inferred from the presence of well-worn grinding stones or the remains of storage pits or bins. In some cases, archaeologists have excavated whole villages such as Kumadzulo just north of the middle Zambezi River in Zambia, or Kgaswe in the Toutswe region of eastern Botswana. From these and other smaller excavations we can learn a great deal about the Early Iron Age way of life.

Bantu 'migrations'

Before the development of radiocarbon dating and the widespread archaeological research that has taken place since the 1950s, it was believed that Bantu speakers spread across eastern, central and southern Africa in the comparatively recent past. The main source of

evidence was oral traditions, which seldom traced ruling lineages back more than 500 years. It was assumed, therefore, that to have populated the subcontinent in so short a time there must have been large-scale conquering migrations of whole new peoples. It is now believed, however, that the initial spread of early Bantu speakers was of very small numbers, infiltrating new areas and intermarrying with and otherwise absorbing indigenous hunter-gatherer communities. And all this occurred over a very long period of time, stretching back at least to the early centuries of the Common Era. Nowadays, it is generally considered misleading to refer to the spread of Bantu-speaking farmers as 'migrations'.

Figure 4.1 A blacksmith at work in western Zambia in 1972, using traditional double bellows, such as may have been used in Iron Age times.



Source: © Kevin Shillington.

Origins of the Early Iron Age in sub-equatorial Africa

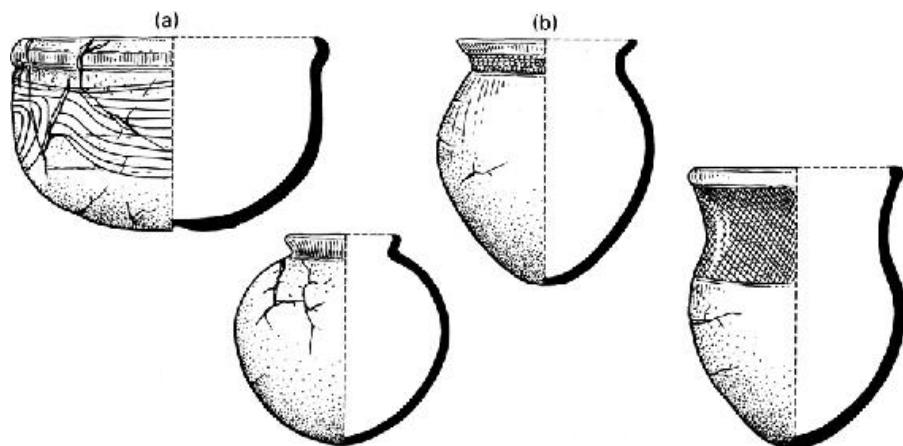
We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that early Bantu-speaking farmers were already spreading through the Congo forest by the first millennium BCE. At this stage, they still used stone tools and so, for easier cultivation, they sought out natural forest clearings and forest fringes. Their main crops were palm oil, nuts and root crops like yams, all suitable for the high-rainfall forest zone. They had not yet learned to cultivate the cereal crops more suitable for the drier, summer rainfall, savannah regions

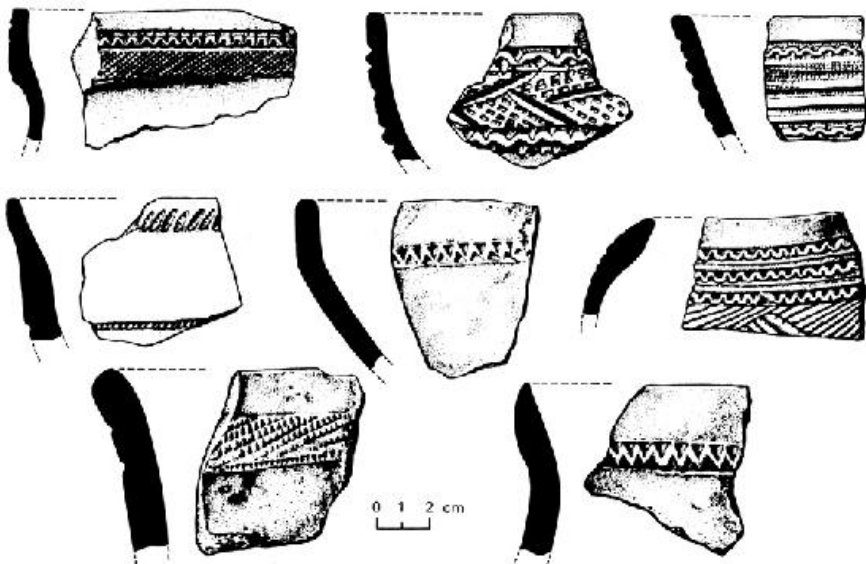
that stretched to their east and south. Cereals such as millets and sorghum, however, had already been domesticated in the savannah regions of the Sudan. As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), some form of pastoralism and cereal cultivation was established in the Great Rift Valley and Great Lakes (sometimes referred to as ‘interlacustrine’, ‘between lakes’) region of east Africa during the same period. We have already seen in [Chapter 3](#) that ironworking was well established in central Nigeria by 500 BCE and in the Great Lakes region of east Africa by at least 600 BCE.

The spread of the Early Iron Age

Although the period of the initial spread of Bantu-speaking farmers through the southern half of the continent is known as the ‘Early Iron Age’, one must be careful not to assume that a knowledge of iron technology was the be-all and end-all of Bantu culture. Indeed, the fact that ironworking technology appears to have been known to the Bantu speakers of east Africa for several centuries before their rapid spread across the region suggests another interesting possibility.

Figure 4.2 Early Iron Age pottery: East African pots (*above*), and rims of clay pots from the southern edge of the Congo forest (*below*).





It is important to remember that the earliest Bantu-speaking farmers had been forest dwellers, whose principal skills for living were gathering fruit and nuts, fishing and cultivating roots. In the dry savannah country to the east of the Congo forest, they had come into contact with Sudanic and Cushitic-speaking peoples whose principal skills for living were herding cattle, hunting and cultivating cereals. It has recently been suggested that it may have been the Bantu speakers' absorption of this savannah culture, and hence their mastery of a wide range of mixed farming practices and beliefs, rather than simply the adoption of iron technology, which accounts for the rapid spread of their settlements across eastern, central and southern Africa during the first few centuries CE (see [Map 4.2](#)). Another factor that may have influenced this rapid spread was the arrival on the continent of new crops from southeast Asia. Of particular importance were the banana and the Asian yam, traditionally believed to have been brought to the east African coastal region by Austronesian sailors (people of the Malaysian/Indonesian/Australian/Polynesian group), who colonised the island of Madagascar in about the second century CE (see [Chapter 10](#)). The banana, however, was well established on the east African coast in the early centuries CE and may have been brought via India in earlier centuries. These Asian crops were probably carried inland up the river valleys of eastern Africa such as the Rufiji or the Zambezi. The banana, in particular, soon became an important, high-yielding, staple crop in the moister regions of the continent, such as the Congo forest and the lakeside region of southern Uganda.

The exact routes and directions of the spread of Early Iron Age

Bantu speakers, however, remain speculative. Archaeologists studying styles of pottery decoration and furnace construction have identified general differences between eastern and western traditions. This suggests the spread of two slightly different Iron Age cultures, one from east Africa and the other from western central Africa. The division between the two material cultures seems to fall along the line of the Luangwa valley of what is today eastern Zambia, which corresponds roughly with linguistic evidence for the development and spread of eastern and western ‘Bantu’ (see [Map 4.1](#)).

Previous editions of this book, following the lead of earlier archaeologists, referred to ‘the “advance” of Early Iron Age peoples along two broad fronts or “streams”’. The use of the words ‘advance’ and ‘streams’ implies a continuous flow or migration of people in one direction. Research by archaeologists over the past two decades, however, has shown ‘advance’ and ‘stream’ to be inappropriate in this context. The expansion of early ironworking cultures was far more complex than was previously assumed.

In western central Africa, in particular, the spread of early ironworking settlements was a complex mosaic of movement – north, south, east and west, with plenty of overlap between them. The impulse for new land was not necessarily southwards. In due course, however, they did venture southwards, perhaps impelled by several centuries of warmer, moister weather that may have led to an increase in tropical forest cover and a consequent reduction in the amount of available savannah land within forest clearings.

The largest and most revealing Iron Age sites of the savannah woodland just south of the Congo forest are to be found around Lake Kisale in the upper Lualaba valley. Here there is evidence of copper smelting as well as iron smelting from as early as the fourth century CE. While iron was used for making tools, copper was still used for necklaces and jewellery, trade or even currency. There seem to have been continuous and thriving farming and trading settlements in this area right through into at least the late nineteenth century. We shall return to this region when looking at the growth of Later Iron Age states in [Chapter 10](#). In the upper Zambezi valley, a couple of early first- to second-century ironworking sites have been identified. But most of the Early Iron Age settlement between the Kafue and Zambezi Rivers seems to have developed between the third and seventh centuries CE.

The earliest east African Iron Age pottery has been identified in the Lakeland region to the west of the Great Rift Valley. It has been classified as ‘Urewe ware’ and firmly dated to between the second and fifth centuries CE. A similar style of pottery, classified as ‘Kwale ware’,

Early Iron Age occupation of the Zimbabwe plateau, south of the Zambezi, seems to have started with the makers of what is known as ‘Bambata pottery’, who were settled in southern Zimbabwe in the second century CE. The main settlement of the Zimbabwe Plateau by Early Iron Age farmers occurred between the third and fifth centuries. Their pottery suggests a combination of eastern and western styles and is generally grouped together as ‘Gokomere-Ziwa ware’. The earliest known Iron Age settlement of the famous Great Zimbabwe site was in the fourth century, although the stone walls of the area belongs to a later period (see [Chapter 9](#)).

Figure 4.3 Ceramic head from a site near Lydenburg, South Africa, dated c.500–700 ce.

The highveld south of the Limpopo was first colonised by ironworking farmers between the fourth and fifth centuries. One of the most fruitful archaeological sites of this period has been near Lydenburg on the edge of the eastern highveld escarpment. Here, archaeologists have recovered a number of remarkable pottery heads (see [Figure 4.3](#)). The hollow Lydenburg heads have been dated to about 500 CE and were probably used as ceremonial or religious masks. They show a considerable refinement of craftsmanship and suggest a settled, well-organised community, which had the time and desire to develop such skills and ceremonies.

By the fifth century CE, ironworking cultures had reached the southeastern region of present-day South Africa, as far as the Kei River in the Eastern Cape.



Source: Iziko Museums of South Africa, Social History Collections. Reproduced with permission.

The development and organisation of Early Iron Age society

There appear to have been a number of stages in the development of the Iron Age in Bantu-speaking Africa. As we have just seen, the

earliest stage, from the second to the fifth centuries CE, saw the relatively rapid spread of ironworking farmers over much of the eastern, central and southeastern part of the continent. The fifth to eighth centuries were a period of consolidation. The resources of the more favourable regions were developed and exploited and adaptations made to local environments. The eighth to twelfth centuries were a period of transition to what archaeologists and historians refer to as the 'Later Iron Age'. In some areas this latter stage was a local development, while other areas seem to have received 'ready-made' Later Iron Age cultures from outside their area. This suggests a number of centres of development and expansion across the subcontinent, which will be considered in more detail in [Chapter 10](#). The concern of the remainder of this chapter is with the periods of the spread and consolidation of Early Iron Age communities.

Early Iron Age farming

The basis of the Early Iron Age economy was farming. The main crops were sorghum and millets, supplemented with various forms of pumpkin, melon and beans. Most farmers also kept livestock, although the numbers of cattle and sheep or goats were usually small in the early period. Some kept no livestock at all and those who did tended to use them for meat rather than milk and probably slaughtered them on ceremonial or religious occasions. The decision whether or not to keep cattle might be determined by the presence or absence of tsetse fly (for the importance of tsetse fly, see [Chapter 2](#)). Although they were farmers, hunting and gathering remained an important source of food for most peoples throughout the period. To some extent, the relative importance of hunting depended on the agricultural potential of the region. In some areas, fishing was also an important source of food.

During the first few centuries of Bantu expansion, Iron Age farmers were moving into regions only thinly populated by small roving bands of pre-existing hunter-gatherers. They were therefore able to select the most suitable sites for their farming settlements. This freedom to choose the best sites – where the soil was most fertile, the grazing and the rainfall just right for their crops – probably explains their relatively rapid spread across the subcontinent in the early period. There was no need to clear thick forest or adopt new techniques to suit a difficult environment. New generations could simply move on to new areas. At first, therefore, settlements were usually confined to fertile river valleys and favourable rainfall regions, hence the general

movement towards the southeast, avoiding the dry southwest.

Early Iron Age settlements

Villages were typically small, with up to a dozen or so houses. In some areas, however, settlements were quite large, such as in Natal, where villages up to eight hectares in extent have been recorded. Houses were usually made of poles and clay, although there was a wide variety of styles and methods of construction depending on locally available resources. Their small round houses were usually arranged in a circular pattern enclosing a fenced livestock pen where cattle or goats were confined at night. Each village usually also contained a number of storage bins for grain. This might take the form of a clay-lined pit or a specially constructed bin, raised on stones or poles.

Politically, communities were probably organised on a simple village basis, with each village containing an extended family and its dependants. There was a clear division of labour between men and women, with the women tending the crops, preparing the food and caring for the small children. The men tended the livestock and hunted for meat and for animal skins for clothing. They conducted trade and other relations with neighbouring peoples where necessary and normally assumed overall control of production within the community. The dominance of men in this society is indicated by their exclusive burials in the ground beneath the central livestock enclosure. Women and children were buried near their houses around the outer edge of the village. Besides indicating their gender-derived status, the burial sites also reflect their gendered roles in society: men tended the cattle, while the women's realm was the home and the raising of children.

An important factor in the early spread and siting of Iron Age settlements was the need to find sources of iron ore together with sufficient hardwood for the charcoal to fire their smelting furnaces. Experiments conducted in modern times, using techniques practised in the Later Iron Age period, revealed that a clay furnace with draught pipes attached for rapid ventilation consumed 1,000 kilos of hardwood charcoal in the smelting of enough iron to make about three hoes. Iron smelting under these circumstances was clearly an expensive business in terms of labour and timber. Nevertheless, in contrast to the later period when technical and craft specialisations were developed, most Early Iron Age villages smelted their own iron. But it was probably on a small scale and there is some evidence of continuing use of certain stone tools, for instance scrapers for preparing skins and, of course, grinding stones. Stone was also used

for hammering the newly smelted iron during forging. For a while, stone axes may have continued to be used for some of the heavier tasks of cutting trees, before a harder, higher quality iron was developed.

Most Early Iron Age communities were more or less self-sufficient, although there is increasing evidence of small-scale trade between communities from a very early period. This was most likely in areas where there was abundance of a particular natural resource such as copper and salt at Sanga in the Congo and salt at Uvinza in Tanzania. Some of the communities that were to develop a specialisation in iron smelting were at places of rich ore deposits such as the Tswapong Hills of eastern Botswana or Palaborwa in the eastern Transvaal.

As the more favourable sites were occupied, the rapid dispersal to new areas slowed down. Along the southern coast of South Africa, the most westerly Early Iron Age settlement, dated to the sixth or seventh century, was just west of the River Kei. It is no coincidence that this was the westernmost limit of summer seasonal rainfall suitable for growing tropical cereal crops. To have expanded further west would have meant having to abandon their known agricultural practices or develop entirely new crops and techniques. During the middle period, from the fifth to the eighth century, therefore, Iron Age farmers throughout the subcontinent began to make fuller use of available resources in the regions already occupied. In the Natal region of the southeast, for instance, initial settlements had been confined to coastal lowlands and valley bottoms. Gradually, more use was made of the summer pastures of the Drakensberg foothills and consequently cattle assumed a greater importance in the economy. Similarly, in the drier grassland highveld of the western Transvaal and bordering on the eastern Kalahari, where cereal harvests were not so reliable, an emphasis on rearing stock is evident from an early period. In the denser woodland regions north of the Zambezi, however, the presence of tsetse fly ensured that domestic cattle did not so quickly become important to local economies. Here, the regular hunting of wild game continued to provide an important supplement to the main agricultural diet of millet and sorghum.

Farmers and hunter-gatherers

Because the movement of the earliest Iron Age farmers was in relatively small numbers, they did not displace the pre-existing, stone-using hunter-gatherers. It was a while before Iron Age farmers came to dominate the hunter-gatherers. There is evidence of continued occupation of parts of the east African plateau by stone-using peoples

until at least as late as 1000 CE. Initially, there was enough room for both cultures to live alongside each other in relative harmony. Indeed, they probably benefited from each other's presence. The farmers were a source of food in times of hardship and were also a source of iron tips for hunting spears and arrows. In exchange, the hunter-gatherers could offer hunting produce, medicinal herbs and skills, and other services such as herding livestock. In this way, a degree of interdependence built up between hunter-gatherer and farmer.

In this respect, it is worth remembering that the Khoesan were herding cattle and sheep or goats in the region ahead of the arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers. Furthermore, many of the words in southern Bantu languages that relate to cattle and cattle-herding practices are derived from Khoesan languages. As a result, it has been suggested that Bantu speakers of southern Africa may have acquired their cattle, or at least their cattle-herding practices, from the Khoesan themselves.

In central and southern Africa, Iron Age farmers deliberately absorbed Khoesan hunter-gatherers into their ranks, and not just as client herdsmen or hunters. There is archaeological evidence of a clear Khoesan-black African mix in skeletons recovered from Early Iron Age graves. There is also linguistic evidence in terms of characteristic Khoesan 'clicks' in certain Bantu languages, especially in the south, although this may have been a later development. The Early Iron Age farmers practised male polygamy and so always needed a surplus of women. Khoesan women were probably attracted into farming society through the payment of a bride price or *lobola* of livestock or metal goods to the bride's family. The labour of women and their offspring increased food production and thus the security and wealth of the community. In the long term, therefore, ironworking farming communities were strengthened at the expense of the hunter-gatherers. But it was a slow process and for many generations the two lifestyles coexisted with each other. In some regions, the process of absorption occurred more rapidly or more thoroughly than in others. In the agriculturally favourable regions north of the Zambezi, for instance, distinct groups of hunter-gatherers were absorbed much more quickly than in drier regions further to the southwest.

In the dry regions of southwestern Africa, the herding and hunter-gathering economy continued to offer advantages over farming. Khoesan and Bantu speakers met on more equal terms and absorption by Bantu speakers was less marked and less inevitable. Indeed, in the sandveld regions of the western Kalahari and Namibia west of the Okavango Delta, Khoesan speakers remained dominant until more recent centuries.



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SECTION 3



RELIGION AND EMPIRE IN NORTHERN AND WESTERN AFRICA



The central theme of [Chapters 5](#), [6](#) and [7](#) is the early spread, impact and political role of Christianity and Islam and their relationships with indigenous African religious beliefs. As will be seen from the evidence of these chapters, religion can be a stimulus to unity, promoting social stability and reducing warfare. It can also become a rationale for resistance to perceived injustice. On the other hand, it can become a stimulus to political and religious rivalry and a justification for warfare.

The spread of Christianity through Egypt and north Africa in the first to fourth centuries was probably enhanced by a desire for spiritual relief from the harsh physical realities of Roman imperial exploitation. In due course, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianity adapted to local cultural conditions and indigenous beliefs and became a force for resistance to the religious imperialism emanating from the Roman Christian Church. Most of these Christian communities, however, were swept aside by the invasion of Arabian Islam in the seventh century. The fact that Nubian Christianity survived the initial Arab onslaught was as much due to historic Nubian resistance to rule from Egypt as to any sense of unity provided by Nubian Christianity.

The simplicity of Islam, not dogged by complex theology, enabled

its rapid spread through northern Africa, first by conquest and later by informal contact. In doing so, it provided an element of unity, especially among the nomads of the Sahara.

Islam has over the centuries, even into present times, seen numerous attempts at renewal. Attempts by Islamic scholars to return Islam to the perceived purity of its roots in the Qur'an have been seized on by self-appointed political leaders and used to justify the waging of holy warfare against non-believers and fellow Muslims alike in the name of Islamic purity and unity. The first of these movements occurred among the Berbers of the western Sahara, resulting in the Almoravid Empire that briefly united the western Sahara and the north African Maghrib. Religious belief alone, however, was never enough to cement an empire and regional princes soon asserted local independence.

Nevertheless, the reduction in internecine warfare among Saharan nomads provided a stimulus to long-distance trans-Saharan trade. Combined with the widespread use of the camel, which had revolutionised desert travel, this brought sub-Saharan Africans more directly into the Mediterranean world and, in so doing, provided a stimulus to the growth of large Iron Age states in west Africa. The first of these, Ancient Ghana, grew rich and powerful as an entrepôt between the goldfields of the woodland savannah and the salt pans of the desert.



The extent to which Islam took over the state, or the state took over Islam, remains a topic of historical debate. We address this debate in more detail in 'Almoravids, Islam and Ancient Ghana' on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

A common belief in Islam enabled the rulers of Ghana's successor states, Mali and Songhay, to cement the relationship of the ruling class and the merchants of their vast savannah empires. Through the support of their rulers, who made pilgrimage to Mecca, centres such as Timbuktu became major centres of Islamic learning at a time when Muslim scholarship led the scientific world. At the same time, the rulers of Mali and Songhay allowed the preservation of west African indigenous religious beliefs. In doing so, they respected the 'spirits of the land' that underpinned the agricultural economy, which was the

basis of the long-term survival of these empires.

CHAPTER 5

North Africa to 1000 CE

Northern Africa in the Graeco-Roman period

Egypt under Greek rule

We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that the Greek army of Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 BCE and that his general Ptolemy founded a dynasty of Greek-speaking pharaohs who ruled Egypt for the next 300 years. The Greeks viewed their new conquest as a crucial, pivotal point in a vast trading network. Egypt linked the northern world of Mediterranean Europe with the riches of the African interior and the Indian Ocean. The valley of the Nile also had the agricultural potential to support a large and wealthy merchant class. One of the first actions of the new Greek rulers was to found the great trading city of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast of the Nile Delta. From there, the ancient Egyptian trading system was developed and expanded – northwards into Mediterranean Europe and southwards through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. We have already seen how the expansion of Red Sea trade at this time probably stimulated the growth of the Kingdom of Meroe in the African interior of the Upper Nile. By 250 BCE, the Greek rulers of Egypt had built up a trading fleet of some 4,000 ships there.

It was during this period that the Arabian camel became widely used in Egypt. It was a larger pack animal than the Egyptian donkey and had already proved its effectiveness in the Arabian Desert. Able to withstand heat and long periods without water, the camel was a valuable addition to Egyptian trading routes between the Nile and the Red Sea.

Northern Africa in the Graeco-Roman period

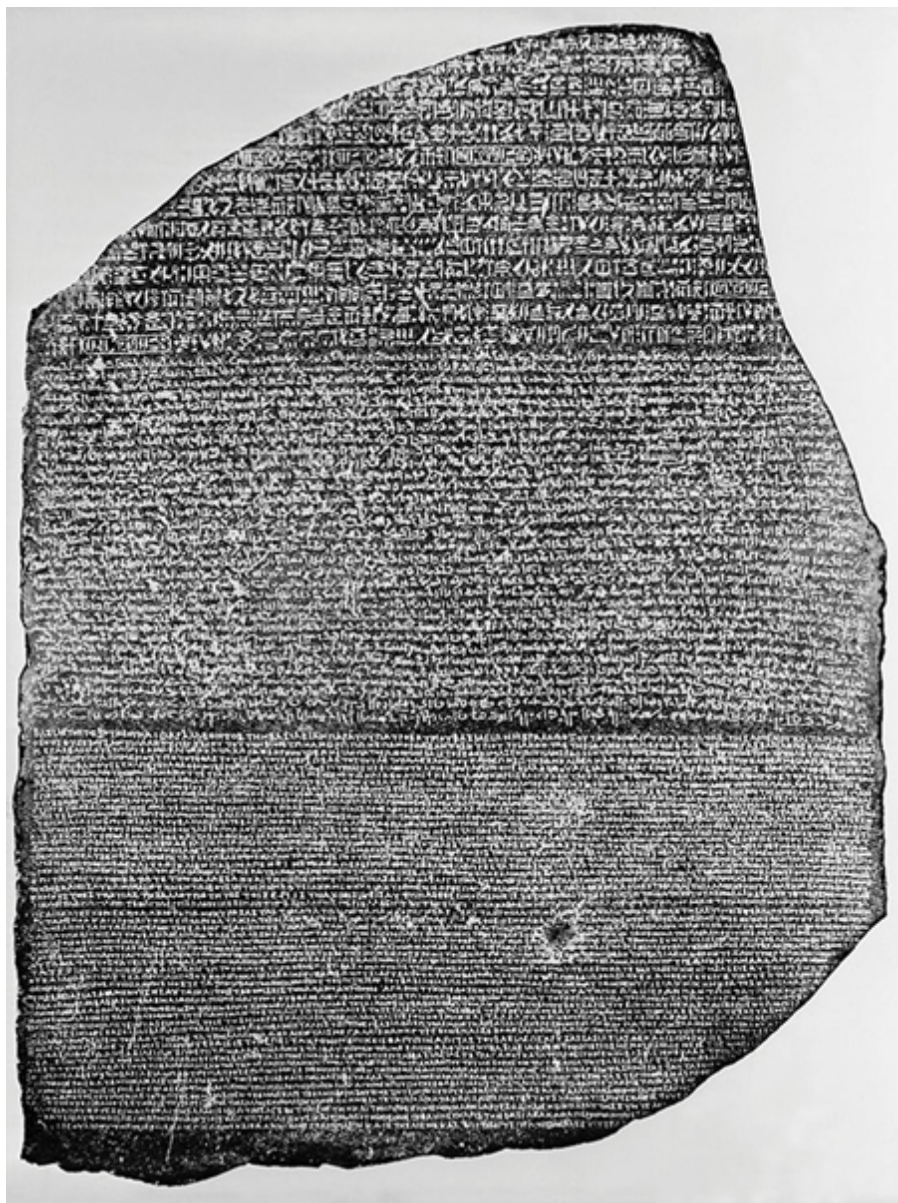


The Greeks brought to Egypt their own language and a faster flowing, simpler form of writing. They built up a huge Greek-speaking bureaucracy of government officials who soon displaced the old Egyptian scribes. With Greek the language of officialdom, the formal language of Ancient Egyptian fell into disuse (see [Figure 5.1](#)). The more artistic but cumbersome Egyptian hieroglyphics also fell out of use and were abandoned. The Egyptian dialect of the common people evolved into what was to become known as ‘Coptic’. In later centuries, this indigenous Egyptian language recovered some status as the language of the Coptic Christian Church (see below).

To the mass of the Egyptian peasantry, the main impact of the Ptolemaic dynasty was the introduction of a harsher, more efficient system of taxation. The new Greek-speaking tax collectors penetrated deep into Upper Egypt, remeasuring the agricultural floodplain and reassessing taxes. They introduced a system of ‘competitive taxation’, whereby those peasants who promised to pay the heaviest taxes were awarded the most land. The system must have caused great hardship for the less fortunate or less efficient farmers. The profits of this taxation went to feed the prosperous merchants and ruling class in the expanding city of Alexandria.

Figure 5.1 The Rosetta Stone, with hieroglyphics, cursive Egyptian and Ancient Greek script. The ability to read Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics had been lost since about the fourth century ce. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799, and the realisation that it

contained three direct translations of the same passage, provided the key that enabled modern scholars, familiar with Ancient Greek, to read and translate Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.



Source: Bettmann/Getty Images.

Definitions of civilisation

For centuries before Alexander's conquest, the Greeks had looked

up to Egypt and admired its religion, arts and society. Greeks such as the historian Herodotus regarded the Egyptians as the cleanest, most religious and most ‘civilised’ of peoples. The word ‘civilised’ is of Greek origin. In general terms, and the way it is used here, it refers to an organised society in which people can practise their arts and culture and live together in harmony. (It is within this general meaning of the word that ‘civilisation’ is used with reference to Ancient Egypt in [Chapter 2](#).) In recent times, the word has fallen into disrepute as European colonisers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used it to suit their own racist ideologies. In their view, only people of their own culture could be called ‘civilised’. All other cultures they regarded as ‘uncivilised’, by which they meant ‘inferior’. European historians carried this attitude into their interpretation of African history during the colonial period of the first half of the twentieth century, and as a result assumed that Africans had little history of note until the coming of Europeans. Historians of Africa have had to struggle against this prejudice ever since. The history of this prejudice is illustrative of the dangers of attaching prejudicial meanings to descriptive words and using them to denigrate people of slightly different cultures. This is all too common in the twenty-first-century world and something that historians in particular should guard against and challenge.

Greek colonisation brought Egypt more thoroughly into the Mediterranean world. But, in doing so, the Ptolemies exploited the Egyptian peoples and hastened the decline of the distinctive Egyptian civilisation, which had persisted for 3,000 years. Nevertheless, their debt to the Ancient Egyptians remained and many of Ancient Egypt’s ideas and achievements lived on in the arts, sciences and religion of the Greek and, later, the Roman world. The Greeks, in their turn, gave Africa two important names: Ethiopia and Libya. ‘Ethiopian’ was the name they used to refer to the dark-skinned peoples living mainly to the south of Egypt. ‘Libyan’ was the Greek name for the Berber peoples living to the west of Egypt.

North Africa under Roman rule

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), to the west of Egypt, the north African coastal region was controlled by the Phoenicians from their trading capital at Carthage (close to today’s city of Tunis). In due course, Greek and Phoenician domination of the Mediterranean gave way to that of

Rome. By the middle of the first century CE, the Romans, from their base in central Italy, had extended their empire over the whole of the Mediterranean world as well as much of western Europe.

Carthaginian trade rivalry with Rome, and in particular their seizure of Greek-dominated trading posts in Sicily, led directly to the First Punic (from the Latin word for Phoenician) War in the middle of the third century BCE. After a century of drawn-out wars, the Romans finally conquered Carthage in 146 BCE and took over the former Phoenician trading colony. The Romans called their new province 'Africa', a name gradually extended to refer to the continent in general. The origin of the word is uncertain. It may have been a Romanised version of a local Tunisian place or people. In due course, the name 'Africa' was adopted by Africans themselves and as such it has persisted to this day.¹

In the mountainous and coastal regions to the west of Carthage lay independent Berber kingdoms. They were made up of a mixture of nomadic mountain pastoralists and settled coastal farmers. Their ruling classes lived in towns and were strongly influenced in their art and architecture by Greek and Phoenician culture. The Romans referred to these Berber kingdoms as 'Numidia' and 'Mauretania'. By the time of the Roman conquest, Massinissa, the ruler of Numidia, had extended his kingdom to cover most of the northern region of modern Algeria. The Romans initially formed an alliance with their powerful Berber neighbours. But gradually over the next two centuries, they interfered in Berber politics, undermined Berber authority and finally, by conquest, brought Numidia and Mauretania within the Roman Empire.

The Romans exploited to the maximum the agricultural potential of their north African possessions. Wheat production on the coastal plains was greatly expanded and groves of olive trees were planted in the dry rocky mountainous terrain further inland. But the agricultural producers of north Africa were very heavily tithed to feed the imperial capital of Rome. Grain and olive oil were exported by the shipload to Rome, where they were distributed free to the privileged citizens of the capital.

Society in Roman north Africa was sharply divided along distinct class lines. In the towns and coastal cities lived the ruling class of Roman administrators and wealthy Romanised Carthaginians (who were themselves a Phoenician-Berber mixture). They owned large estates near the towns, which they farmed with slave labour – mostly Berbers traded or captured from Saharan nomads. Beyond the towns and large estates, the population remained distinctly Berber in language and culture, and resentful of the oppressive Roman presence.

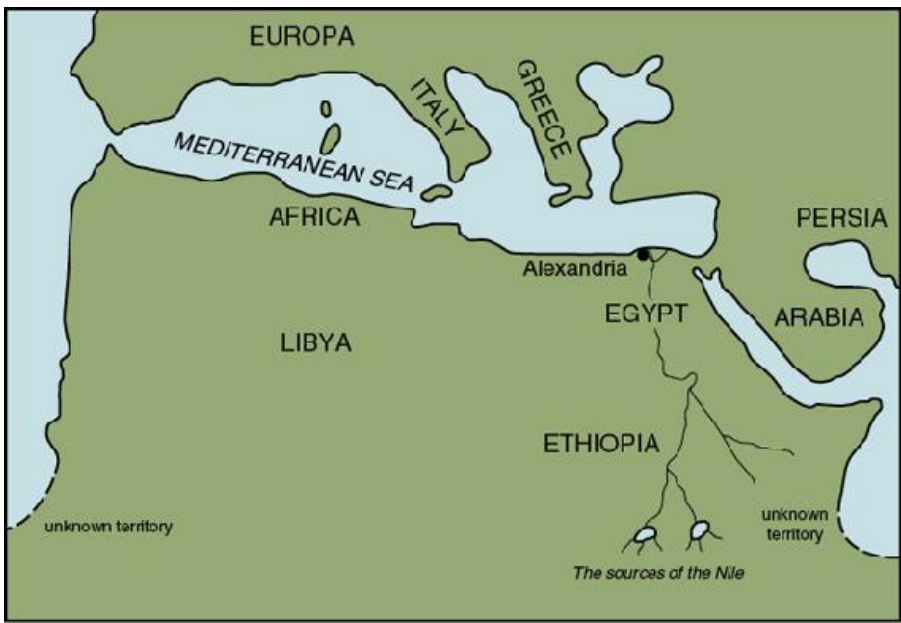
The peasant farmers retained free access to their land but paid heavily in taxation. In turn, they were supposed to receive Roman protection from raids by desert nomads. In practice, they were sometimes better protected from Roman tax collectors by throwing in their lot with the raiding Berber nomads.

Figure 5.2 The old Roman colosseum at Carthage in modern Tunisia, in what was then the Roman colony of 'Africa', from which the continent takes its name.



Source: Alan Tobey/iStock.

Africa according to Ptolemy



Beyond the region of settled farming communities, nomadic pastoralists herded sheep and goats and sometimes cattle. They lived on the very fringes of the Roman provinces, sometimes acknowledging Roman authority, at other times recognising the authority of independent Berber princes. The southern boundaries of Roman control were constantly under threat of raids from independent Berbers of the Sahara. Indeed, it was in an attempt to better patrol their southern border that the Roman military introduced the camel to this region of north Africa. But the camels soon fell into the hands of the Berber nomads themselves, further enhancing the Berbers' desert mobility and ability to conduct lightning raids.

In the fifth century, the Western Roman Empire fell to northern European 'Vandals', who crossed the Mediterranean and drove the Romans out of north Africa. By then, much of Mauretania and Numidia had already fallen to independent Berber chieftains.

In Egypt, the period of Roman rule revived the taxation of the peasantry in an even more oppressive form. Egypt was regarded as little more than a source of grain for Rome. Indeed, the Roman exploitation of the peasantry in Egypt was so acute that many abandoned their fields and took to banditry.

Early Christianity in northern Africa

Judaism in Mediterranean north Africa

Judaism had been present in the major coastal towns of

Mediterranean north Africa before the arrival of the first Christian pioneers, who were themselves Jewish. Jewish merchants and craftsmen were to be found throughout the coastal towns of Mediterranean north Africa, and this trend only increased following the Roman forced dispersal of 70 CE. The concept of monotheism (belief in a single God) thus pre-existed Christianity in the multitheistic world of Greece and Rome, especially in Alexandria, the commercial capital of Egypt.

The spread of Christianity

Of all the early centres of Christendom in the first century CE, Alexandria was perhaps the most important. Alexandria was home to many of the early scholars who first defined the theology of the new religion. It was here that one of the earliest Christian bishoprics was said to have been founded by the apostle and gospel writer Mark.

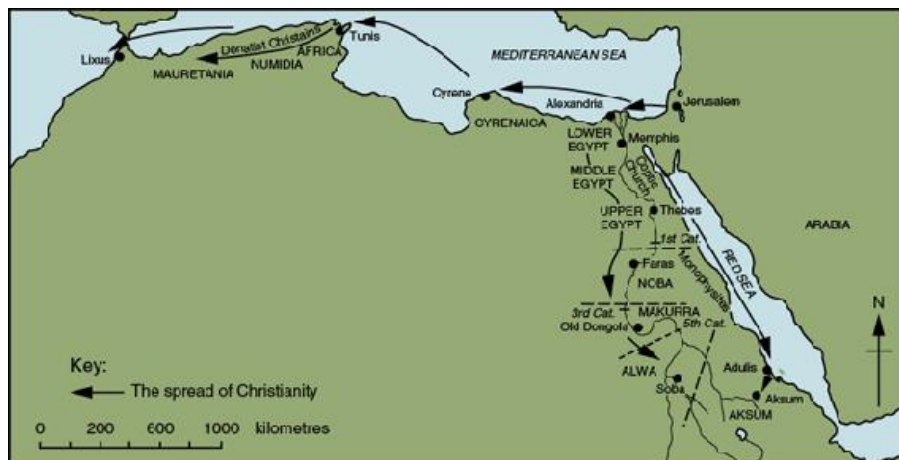
Christianity quickly found an appeal among the oppressed population of first-century Roman Egypt. It offered hope with the promise of a joyful afterlife to those suffering poverty and oppression in the present. Egyptian Christians soon developed a strong monastic tradition. There was something appealing in the notion of groups of religious people living in isolation, devoting their lives to prayer and wrestling with problems of the spirit. Perhaps it was prompted by a desire to turn their backs on the intolerable material world of life in Roman Egypt.

From a slow beginning in the first century, Christianity gradually spread westwards during the second and third centuries to the Berber-speaking peoples of north Africa. As in Egypt, the appeal again may have been partially a reaction to the harsh realities of life in Roman north Africa; an expression, perhaps, of a kind of anti-Roman Berber 'nationalism'. The Romans certainly viewed the early Christian Church as a dangerous and subversive sect, a threat to their authority. It threw a direct challenge into the face of the emperors, several of whom, in the fashion of the pharaohs, claimed to be gods themselves or were worshipped as such by their successors.

Right up until the early fourth century, the Romans mercilessly persecuted the early Christian Church and martyred many thousands of its adherents. The final frenzy of persecution was ordered by Emperor Diocletian in 303 CE, when many thousands of Christians, especially in north Africa, were martyred for refusing to make sacrifices to the Roman gods. The Diocletian persecution did not end until the conversion of his successor Constantine (r.312–37) ten years later. Thereafter, Christianity was officially recognised within the

Roman Empire, although it did not become the state religion until 392 CE.

The spread of Christianity in northern Africa, first to sixth century ce



Donatists in the Maghrib

One of the edicts of Diocletian had been that Christian clergy must hand over all works of Christian scripture; and a majority of Christian clergy were coerced into submission. In Berber north Africa, however, there was strong resistance to the Roman persecution, and Donatus, a Numidian bishop, took the view that those who had submitted to the Diocletian edicts were no longer part of the true Church and should not be readmitted, even after the persecution was ended. Constantine and his successors urged the reunification of all branches of the Church, under Roman leadership. Donatus, however, held out against the readmission of apostate clergy into the Church; and his stand attracted the support of 400 north African bishops, who became known as 'Donatists'. The Romans attempted to bring the Donatists into line and in doing so continued to persecute the Christians of north Africa. Out of this conflict between the Roman Church and the Donatists, Aurelius Augustinus (354–430 CE), a Roman Christian convert from Numidia, rose to prominence. An ardent opponent of the Donatists, as Saint Augustine of Hippo, he was destined to become one of the founding fathers of Roman Christian doctrine. In 411 CE, the Roman Church officially declared Donatism to be a 'heresy', and this

helped to weaken its hold in the urban centres of north Africa.

Within the independent Berber chiefdoms, Donatist Christianity blended with indigenous religious beliefs and practices and adopted many local variations in doctrine and in ceremony. As a result, Christianity was unable to provide an effective force for unity in the face of the seventh- and eighth-century challenge of Islam from Arabia.

The Coptic Church in Egypt

In Egypt, the bulk of local Christians adopted the doctrine of Monophysitism, also unacceptable to the official Roman Church. The Monophysites, in emphasising the divinity of Christ, denied that He could also have been a normal human being. In 451 CE the Roman Church declared their doctrine a 'heresy' and unrepentant Monophysites were expelled from the official Christian Church that stressed the dual – divine and human – nature of Christ. Thereafter, there were two Christian Churches in Egypt. The bulk of the Egyptian population stuck to the Monophysite doctrine and formed the 'Coptic' Church. In doing so, they replaced the Greek language of the official 'Melkite' Church with their own local Coptic language, derived from Ancient Egyptian.

Christianity in Nubia

Between 500 and 600 CE, Monophysite Christian missionaries pushed southwards into Nubia, carrying with them their distinctive doctrine and strong monastic tradition. Nubia by this time was divided into three kingdoms. In the desert and floodplain zone between the first and third cataracts lay the Kingdom of Noba (also known as 'Nobatia') with its capital at Faras. From the third to fifth cataracts was the Kingdom of Makurra (also known as 'Makuria') with its capital at Old Dongola. Finally, in the summer rainfall zone above the fifth cataract lay the Kingdom of Alwa with its capital at Soba on the Blue Nile just south of modern Khartoum. Little is known about the history of these Christian Nubian kingdoms.

Later Arab writers described the Upper Nile valley of Christian Nubia as being thickly populated with small agricultural villages. Date palms and vines were grown in the northern floodplain, while cereals were cultivated further south. And throughout the region the grazing of cattle was widespread. Recent archaeological research has revealed that there was considerable prosperity within the Christian ruling classes. Their craftsmen made fine pottery, decoratively painted after

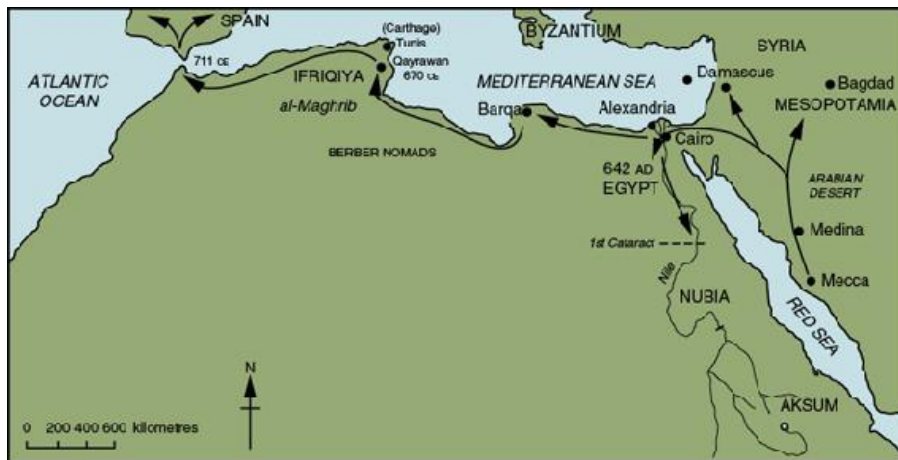
firing. Artistic styles may have been influenced by earlier Meroitic origins. There is also evidence of numerous buildings of stone and wood: churches, monasteries and a range of large dwellings that may have been palaces. It is clear that along the Upper Nile a distinct Nubian Christian civilisation flourished, which, like that of highland Ethiopia, long outlived the seventh-century Arab invasion of Egypt.

The Arab invasions: the Nile valley and the Maghrib

Origins

The Islamic calendar begins in the year 622 CE. (The Islamic calendar is denoted by AH, the year of *Hijrah*, the ‘flight’ from Mecca. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, the Common Era (CE) calendar will be followed throughout this book.) That year the Prophet Muhammad withdrew into the Arabian Desert from his birthplace Mecca to the small oasis settlement of Medina. But he soon returned to reconquer Mecca and by the time of his death in 632 CE, the Prophet had united virtually all the Arabs of Arabia under the new Islamic faith. The subsequent expansion of Islam was remarkably rapid. Within less than a century of Muhammad’s death, the followers of Islam ruled from the Atlantic coast of Morocco and Spain in the west to the River Indus in the east (see [Map 5.4](#)).

For centuries the Arabs had been nomadic pastoralists in a largely desert land. As skilled horsemen, clan had fought clan for control of the oases and scattered pastures to graze their horses, cattle, goats and camels. There had long been movements out of Arabia to more favourable lands beyond the fringes of the desert, but these had been small scale and sporadic. At the same time, the Arabian Peninsula occupied a key trading position between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, between Africa and Asia. Arabs had grown experienced at conducting trading caravans across the Arabian Desert. (‘Caravan’ here means a group of pack animals and their leaders travelling together in convoy on long-distance trading routes.) Indeed, Mecca was an important desert trading junction and Muhammad himself had started life as a trader. Arabs in general were thus well aware of the rich and fertile lands of Mesopotamia and Egypt.



Before the time of Muhammad, Arabs had grown familiar with the notion of a single God, through contact with the Jewish and Christian faiths. One of the great strengths of the new Islamic faith was that its doctrine was simple and easily understandable. It lacked the exclusiveness of Judaism or the complex theology and heresies of Christianity. Belief in Islam simply required a belief in the One True God and an acceptance of His will as revealed by the Prophet Muhammad. And the words of the Prophet were recorded in the Qur'an. Islam lacked the mystery and ceremony of other religions. Nor was it ruled by an exclusive, upper class of priests. It simply called for regular private prayer and a strict regime of fasting before the holy feast of Ramadan.

The spirit of Islam was one of kindness and generosity. It brought the Arabs a new sense of brotherhood. Previously, the rival clans of Arabia had been linked only by a common language, Arabic. They had long looked to the wealth of new lands beyond the desert but had lacked the strength for conquest. Islam brought them the great power of unity with which to carry out that conquest.

Conquest of Egypt

By 640 CE, the Arab army had conquered the 'Fertile Crescent' (of ancient Mesopotamia and the Jordan valley; see [Map 2.3](#)) and swept into the delta region of the lower Nile. Egypt at this time was ruled by Byzantium. (This Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, modern Istanbul, had risen to prominence in the fifth century, when the Western Roman Empire had fallen to the Vandals and other invaders from northern Europe.) The oppression and corruption of Byzantine rule and Byzantine persecution of the Coptic Church prompted the majority of Egyptians to offer no resistance to

the Arabs. By 642 CE, the Arab army had expelled the unpopular Byzantine administrators from Egypt. But the Byzantines still maintained a powerful navy that threatened the Arab presence at Alexandria. This led the Arabs to move their centre of administration inland to the head of the Nile Delta. There, near the ruins of the Ancient Egyptian city of Memphis, they founded a number of settlements that were later to become the Islamic capital of Cairo ('al-Qahira'). From here, they were better able to dominate the Nile valley to the south as well as keep open their trading links with Syria and Arabia.

Arab conquest of Nubia, however, was halted by fierce opposition from the recently united kingdoms of Noba and Makurra. Nubians had long resisted the tendency of the various rulers of Egypt to try and extend their authority southwards into Nubia. In this instance, a huge Nubian army of archers managed to confine the new Islamic rulers of Egypt to north of the first cataract. A treaty was agreed and this led to a lengthy period of peaceful coexistence and profitable trading between Islamic Egypt and Christian Nubia.

The Maghrib

The Arabs referred to the whole coastal region of north Africa west of Egypt as al-Maghrib, meaning 'the West'. Conquest of the Maghrib (or Maghreb) was by no means as easy as that of Egypt. The Arabs faced tough opposition from both the Byzantine Empire and the north African Berbers. Their initial object was to seize control of Carthage and the fertile Tunisian plain. This was the Roman province of 'Africa', which the Arabs called 'Ifriqiya'. The Byzantines had recaptured Carthage from the Vandals in 533 CE and they now used their powerful navy to protect it from Arab attack. It was not until the 690s that the Arabs had built enough ships to defeat the Byzantine fleet. The conquest and destruction of Carthage soon followed. Near its ruins the victorious Arabs built their own city of Tunis.

Meanwhile, Ifriqiya itself was under attack from Berber chiefdoms in the west and desert nomads in the south. We have already seen how the Berbers of north Africa had long resisted the alien rule of the Roman Empire. Now, in the Berber nomads of the northern Sahara, the Arabs appeared to have met their match. The Berbers equalled the Arabs in their mastery of the camel and their conduct of lightning raids from the northern fringes of the desert. On one occasion, 'rebel' Berbers from the central Maghrib drove the Arabs from the fortress of Qayrawan, their main base in Ifriqiya. But the Berbers were unable to sustain their resistance, being weakened by their lack of unity and

coordination. For the Arabs, on the other hand, unity was their greatest strength, and they used it to overcome the Berber chiefdoms one at a time. By 711 CE, the Islamic army had reached the Atlantic coast of Morocco and was poised to cross into Spain.

Arab rule in northern Africa

Initially, the Arab presence in northern Africa was as an army of occupation. Their basic policy was that subject peoples should be given a choice: pay a poll tax (a tax paid by each adult), convert, or die. Non-Muslims were thus a useful source of taxation and there was no widespread attempt at conversion. This enabled early Muslims in north Africa to be largely exempt from taxation, enabling them to become established as an élite ruling class, quite distinct from indigenous non-Muslims. It also allowed pre-existing Jewish communities of merchants and craftsmen to thrive in the rising commercial ports of 'Islamic' north Africa.

Christianity had never been deep-rooted in Berber society and the established Christian Church in north Africa did not long survive the initial Arab conquest. But, although official Christianity was quickly abandoned, north African Berbers as a whole did not readily accept the new Islamic faith either, preferring to revert to their pre-Christian indigenous beliefs, which placed great faith in the spiritual elements of the natural world. Indeed, for the best part of a century, Arabs – and Islam – in the Maghrib were mostly confined to coastal towns. There they organised slave labour to work the nearby farming estates. Their slaves were drawn largely from Berbers captured in war and later from peoples raided or traded from the central and southern Sahara. The early Arab rulers of the Maghrib made little effort to conquer the highlands and desert fringes to the south. Provided some sort of tribute was paid, the Berber chiefdoms were left to their own devices.

One major way in which Islam was spread among the Berbers of north Africa was through membership of the army. From quite early on, conquered or captive Berbers were recruited into the army where they were indoctrinated in the Muslim faith. They proved very able soldiers and ardent propounders of the new religion. As such, they profited from the expansion of the Islamic empire. Indeed, it was a largely Berber Islamic army that crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 CE and spearheaded the conquest of Spain, where they were known as 'Moors' (people from Mauretania).

Within Egypt, the Arabs quickly settled down as administrators, merchants and, to some extent, landlords. On the whole, however,

they left the majority of Coptic-speaking Egyptian peasants in possession of their land. The Egyptian population of the time has been estimated to have been as high as 15 million. As with earlier alien rulers of the Nile valley, the Arabs regarded Egypt as a major source of wealth for their empire, mainly in the form of food collected through taxation. But the Arab system of poll tax was less oppressive than the corrupt administration of the 'competitive taxation' of the Greeks and Romans before them. In addition, the Arabs revived irrigation projects to improve agricultural production. At the same time, increasing numbers of Egyptians learned that they could evade the burdens of taxation by becoming Muslims.

In Egypt, the Arabic language as well as the Muslim religion gradually spread through the local population. This was partly through the immigration of Arab peasants in the eighth and ninth centuries. It was also through a gradual process of education. From the beginning, Arabic had quickly taken over as the language of administration, but it was also the language of the new religion as well as the language of literacy and education. Arabic, mass literacy and Islam were, in fact, all part and parcel of the same thing, spread and achieved through the study of the Qur'an. By the end of the ninth century, the old Coptic language, the descendant of Ancient Egyptian, had become the language of a small minority. It was focused mostly on the remnants of the old Coptic Christian Church, which has survived into modern times. By the beginning of the tenth century, the peoples of the conquered territories of the Maghrib as well as Egypt were predominantly Muslim.

The growth of Muslim states in northern Africa

The initial Arab Islamic unity of the seventh century did not long outlive the great era of conquest. At the heart of the empire, conflict arose over the successor to Muhammad. First the Umayyad and then the Abbasid dynasties seized control of the caliphate (an Islamic state led by a caliph, from *Khalifa*, meaning 'successor' to the Prophet). They claimed their religious guidance and authority from the 'Sunnah', the moral behaviour and sayings of Muhammad, and their branch of Islam became known as 'Sunni'. The Umayyad Caliphate moved the capital to Damascus in 680 CE and then the Abbasid Caliphate moved the capital to Baghdad in 750 CE. Among the main opponents of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates were a group of Muslim people known as 'Shi'ites'. They believed in the hereditary right of Muhammad's descendants to the leadership of the Islamic world. They criticised the opulence and corruption of the caliphs and

advocated a return to piety and strict observance of the Qur'an.

Meanwhile, within the Maghrib, north African Muslims were asserting their independence from the caliphs of the Arab world. Although Arabs had married into the local Berber population, Arabs as a whole retained a strong sense of racial and religious superiority, which was greatly resented by the Berbers. We have already seen at the start of this chapter how the Berbers used Christianity as a tool to subvert Roman rule. This same sectarian tendency emerged now, and partly accounts for the fervour with which the Muslim states of the Maghrib defied the Arab authority of Baghdad and maintained a stout independence from the east. Conversion of the mountain and desert Berbers had been slow. But, when they did turn to the Muslim faith, they followed the unorthodox Shi'ite and Kharijite movements. The Kharijites were ardent opponents of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. They criticised the exclusive Arab culture of orthodox Islam and emphasised the equality of all professing Muslims, no matter what their racial, cultural or linguistic origin. Ironically, the kind of equality they emphasised stemmed from those very principles that had originally united the rival clans of Arabia in the days of Muhammad. The Kharijite movement was reminiscent of the Donatist Christian movement in its rejection of alien authority. As such, it provided a potent stimulus for Berber resistance to eastern Arab rule. A number of Kharijite Berber states rose and fell in the Maghrib during the eighth and ninth centuries, each asserting varying degrees of independence from the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. In centuries to come, these historic separatist tendencies would play a not insignificant part in the foundation of the modern states of the Maghrib – Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Early in the tenth century, a new dynasty arose in the central Maghrib, which was to threaten the very existence of the Abbasids of Baghdad. This was the Fatimid dynasty that, prompted by Shi'ite immigrants from Syria, claimed descent from Muhammad's only surviving daughter Fatima. By 950 CE, the Fatimids had conquered most of the Maghrib region of northern Tunisia and Algeria, but their main object was the Abbasid Caliphate itself. In 969 CE, the Fatimids seized control of the Nile valley, naming their administrative capital Cairo ('al-Qahira') at the head of the Nile Delta, and declared Egypt independent from the alien rule of Baghdad.

Figure 5.3 The remains of a medieval mosque in the desert town of Ong Jemel in southern Tunisia. 'Ong Jemel' ('the neck of the camel') is named after the nearby characteristic rock formation that formed the

background for some of the *Star Wars* films.



Source: Perszing1982/iStock.

Muslim states of north Africa, 750–950 ce



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CHAPTER 6

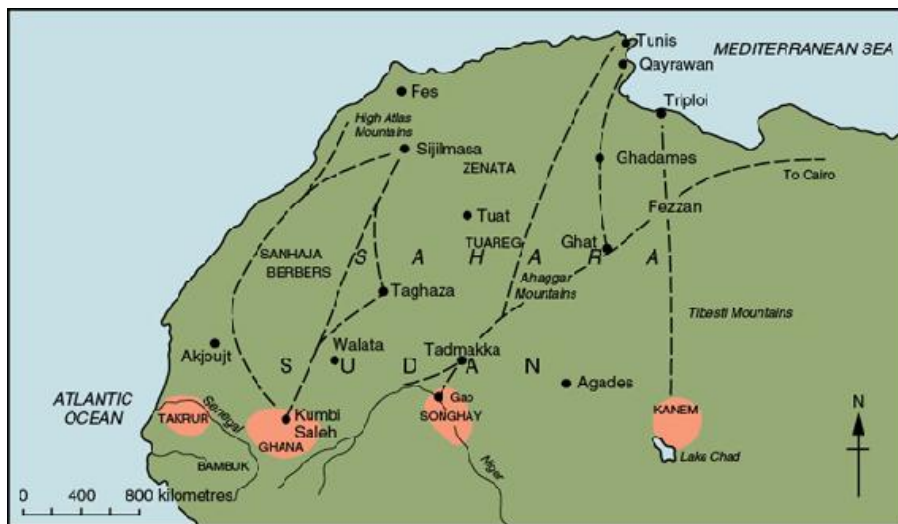
Trans-Saharan trade and the Kingdom of Ancient Ghana

Trans-Saharan trade

We saw in [Chapter 3](#) that long-distance trade across the Sahara had gone on for many centuries before the introduction of the camel. Originally, desert dwellers sold Saharan salt in exchange for food grown by people living north or south of the desert. The earliest trade goods were probably carried strapped to the backs of cattle, known as pack oxen. Evidence for this is found in the Saharan rock paintings described in [Chapter 2](#) ([Figure 2.3](#)). Cattle that were acclimatised to desert conditions could travel several days without water as they moved from the grazing and water of one oasis to another.

One should not, however, gain the impression that trade across the desert was anything other than small scale and sporadic before the introduction of the camel. Pack oxen continued to be used by some traders besides donkeys and horses. But, with each of these animals, the distance they could travel without rest and water was severely limited. Travel across the desert remained a risky business and most trade was passed through the hands of several groups of desert dwellers before it reached its final destination. Small amounts of gold dust and red precious stones known as ‘carbuncles’ filtered northwards across the desert to Roman north Africa. But the Romans did little to stimulate any regular or direct trade right across the Sahara. Until about 300 CE, most of the Roman imports of African ivory, ostrich feathers and furs came from animals still to be found on the northern side of the desert. Trans-Saharan trade was mostly a local affair; its main stimulus was still desert salt in exchange for food.

Trans-Saharan trading networks up to 1200 ce



The camel and the expansion of trans-Saharan trade

During the fourth century, the camel became widespread among most of the Berber nomads of the northern Sahara. By the fifth century, it had become the major form of transport in the desert. The introduction of the camel could be said to have revolutionised the scope and scale of trans-Saharan trade. It had a number of distinct advantages over other transport animals.

Although a single camel could not carry much more in weight than a good pack ox, the camel could maintain a steady pace over much longer distances. A fully laden camel, carrying 130 kilos, could maintain a steady regular pace of 25–30 kilometres a day. It could even, on occasion, travel 100 kilometres or more in a single day. The fat stored in its hump and water stored in its gut enabled it to travel up to ten days without fresh water – twice the time and distance of most pack oxen and horses. It could withstand the daytime heat and the night-time cold of the desert. And, with its large splayed feet, it could negotiate the soft sandy conditions often found away from the main desert tracks.

With the camel, desert nomads could reach more distant oases and so open up whole new routes across the Sahara. Although never without risk, desert travel became a lot more reliable. For the first time, it was possible for experienced desert travellers to seriously consider conducting large-scale and regular long-distance trading caravans right across the Sahara.

Desert transport itself remained largely in the hands of Berber

nomads. The principal Berber groups involved were the Sanhaja in the west and the Tuareg in the central and southern Sahara. The latter were distinguished from the Zenata (northern Berbers) by their custom of wearing a veil to cover the lower part of the face. The precise origin of the veil remains unclear, but presumably it offered protection from desert winds and sandstorms.

Although many Saharan Berbers engaged in long-distance trade, at this stage it was seldom a full-time occupation. They remained primarily nomadic pastoralists. At the Saharan oases, they harvested date palms and grazed their flocks of sheep and goats, camels and occasional cattle. Wealthy nomads also kept horses. These were a sign of status and were particularly useful in warfare. In the hottest, driest season of the year, desert nomads moved their flocks and herds to the better grazing of the Maghrib in the north or the Sahel to the south. This brought them into contact, and sometimes conflict, with more settled agricultural populations. (The Sahel is that region of savannah grassland immediately to the south of the desert proper. The word comes from the Arabic *sahil* meaning ‘shore’; the Arabs looked on the Sahara as an ocean, the *sahil* marking the boundary of that ocean of sand with the habitable grasslands beyond.)

Figure 6.1 A modern Tuareg camel train travelling through the desert. Camel trains such as this revolutionised trans-Saharan trade during the fourth and fifth centuries.



Source: oversnap/iStock.

Historically, the west African Sahel is sometimes referred to as the western Sudan and its inhabitants as Sudanese. The name comes from *al-Sudan*, the Arabic word for ‘the black people’ of tropical Africa. But this should not be confused with the modern republics of Sudan and South Sudan, which are in the eastern, Nile valley region of the Sahel, south of Egypt. During the nineteenth century, the Egyptians and then the British began referring to this upper Nile region simply as ‘Sudan’, and it retained this name as an independent republic from 1956 until the southern half split away as ‘South Sudan’ in 2011.

Although the Sahara itself was mainly Berber territory, small groups of black African peoples lived at some of the central Saharan oases. They harvested dates and dug salt to exchange for food, but they were often kept in a subordinate position by the Berber nomads who dominated most of the oases. They were possibly descendants from those earlier Neolithic fishermen and hunters discussed in [Chapter 1](#). One of the principal salt mines of the desert was Taghaza in the centre of the western Sahara. There, salt deposits were so thick that it was dug out in slabs, which were then strapped to pack animals. With the expansion of trade in later centuries, even the houses and mosques of Taghaza were built out of blocks of salt and roofed with camel skins.

Figure 6.2 Ubari oasis, in the Fezzan region of the Libyan Sahara. It was the existence of water at oases such as this that enabled the development of regular long-distance trans-Saharan travel and trade. Here, desert dwellers harvested dates and mined salt, which they traded in exchange for food, clothing and other goods.



Source: PatrickPoendl/iStock.

As the camel revolutionised desert transport, the products of sub-Saharan Africa became more readily available to the Mediterranean world. The trade in west African gold began to expand. At the same time, the wild game animals of northern Africa were finally wiped out by overhunting. This led to an increasing demand for ivory, ostrich feathers and furs from the sub-Saharan savannah. With all this expansion in cross-desert traffic, a number of important trading settlements developed north and south of the Sahara. Here, goods were exchanged and camel caravans offloaded and reloaded for transport across the desert. Although the caravan traffic remained in the hands of desert nomads, the actual demand and exchange of goods was largely controlled by the peoples of the settled societies to their north and south. The next section will consider one of the more important of those societies south of the Sahara.

The Kingdom of Ancient Ghana

The Kingdom of Ancient Ghana is not to be confused with the modern republic of the same name. Although the name of modern Ghana was chosen in honour of the ancient historic state, there was, in fact, no direct relationship between the two. Ancient Ghana was several hundred kilometres northwest of the modern republic. It dominated the southern border region of modern Mauritania and Mali between about the fifth and thirteenth centuries CE.

The Kingdom of Ancient Ghana in the eleventh century,

superimposed on modern boundaries



The Kingdom of Ancient Ghana was one of the most important, and certainly the best known, of the early west African Iron Age states. The principal people of Ancient Ghana were the Soninke (that is, speakers of the Soninke language, a division of Mande, which, along with Bantu, was a major language family of the Niger-Congo group – see [Map 4.1](#)). Ghana, the name by which the state was known to outsiders, was one of the titles of its king. Some people believe that the true name of the kingdom itself was Wagadugu, although this was the name of a fifteenth-century Mossi kingdom.

The origins of Ancient Ghana

We saw in [Chapter 2](#), when discussing the impact of agriculture, that the development of farming enabled people to live together in larger, settled communities. The subsequent development of ironworking further increased farming and hunting efficiency. In west Africa, this occurred in the last few centuries BCE and the early centuries of the Common Era (see [Chapter 3](#)). Many west African societies remained

organised on a simple small village basis. In some cases, however, village clans grouped together to form larger chiefdoms. There were usually particular local reasons for this. In the Sahel grassland just south of the Sahara, a number of such chiefdoms joined together to form a loose sort of empire – the Empire, or Kingdom, of Ghana. The origin of Ghana was partially an extension of the natural ability of ironworking farmers to form larger settled communities. But there were particular reasons why Ghana should have arisen as a relatively large state at the particular time and in the way and on the scale that it did.

We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that the Sahel was one of the regions for the early domestication of sorghum and millet. As the Sahara grew drier towards the end of the BCE period, farming techniques needed to be improved to make the most of limited fertile soil and rainfall. The ancestors of the original Ghanaians may have been descended from Neolithic fishermen who had long experience of living in large settled communities. They had taken the lead in developing new farming techniques. Iron swords and spears appear to have been used in the region from an early date, and it is possible that the Soninke used superior iron weaponry to seize farming and grazing land from their weaker, less organised neighbours. Being near the southern fringes of the desert, the Soninke were also in contact with Saharan nomads from whom they obtained horses. This gave their rulers additional military advantage over the neighbouring peoples of the savannah.

Contacts with Saharan nomads, however, were not necessarily peaceful. With the drying out of the Sahara, desert nomads pressed further into the Sahel for their seasonal grazing. In years of drought, their seasonal migrations took the form of raids on settled agricultural communities. As Sanhaja Berber nomads of the western Sahara raided deep into the Sahel, Soninke farmers may have been prompted to group together for their own defence. It thus seems likely that Sanhaja raids were at least one stimulus to the early formation of the Ghanaian state.

But perhaps more important even than this was Ghana's position at the heart of regional trade. At the height of its greatness, the Ghanaian state grew powerful and its rulers grew rich on the strength of the trans-Saharan trade. It therefore seems likely that trade was a major factor in the growth of the state from the very beginning.

The Soninke were ideally placed to exploit a growth in trade to and from the Sahara. From their position in the western Sahel, they were midway between the desert – the main source of salt – and the territory of Bambuk to their southwest, the main source of gold. Initially, the Soninke could supply the desert salt producers of

Taghaza with their surplus grain in exchange for salt. Then, the fifth-century introduction of the camel to trans-Saharan trade gave a great boost to trans-desert traffic. In particular, it widened north African access to west African gold. As the trans-Saharan demand for gold increased, the Soninke were able to act as 'middlemen' in passing on Saharan salt to the gold producers to their south. Thus, it would seem to be no coincidence that the origins of the Kingdom of Ghana stem from the fifth century CE.

The expansion of the gold trade

During the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, north African Arabs became more directly involved in the trade in gold. Islamic trading towns such as Sijilmasa to the south of the Moroccan High Atlas became important northern bases for the expanding trans-Saharan trade. There, Arab merchants bought west African gold and financed further Berber caravans.

Through closer Arab contact, Berber nomads of the northern and western Sahara gradually converted to Islam. This eased their transactions with the Arab merchants of the Maghrib and also increased the sense of brotherhood and cooperation among the nomads themselves. Travel became safer, and less subject to raids. At the same time, during the ninth and tenth centuries, there was a great increase in the demand for gold for minting into coins by the Islamic states of north Africa. As the volume of trade increased, many former nomads became full-time desert traders. By the tenth century, the camels of a single trans-Saharan caravan might number several hundred. The expansion of the trans-Saharan trade in gold was paralleled by a growth in the state of Ghana.

On the southern side of the desert, Islamic Berber traders had their own urban bases. Here, southbound caravans were unloaded and rested before the final stage of the journey to Ghana. It was also at the southern Saharan base that northbound caravans were loaded and stocked up for the two-month trek across the desert. One of the most important of these Islamic Berber towns was Awdaghust in the southwestern Sahara. As trade expanded, there was considerable rivalry between the Muslim Berbers of Awdaghust and the Soninke of Ghana. At the height of its power in the eleventh century, Ghana expanded to enclose Awdaghust within its kingdom.

Arabic description of the Kingdom of Ghana

An important result of increasing Arab interest in the source of gold

was the appearance of Ghana in the Arabic writings of the time. At this time, the non-Islamic peoples of sub-Saharan Africa were not literate, so they produced no written records of their own. For written descriptions of the Ghanaian kingdom, the historian must rely on the accounts of outsiders. Some of these had never visited west Africa and merely recorded what they had heard passed on by word of mouth from distant merchants. The historian studying these Arabic accounts must also beware of their tendency to be biased against non-Islamic peoples. In other words, like most historical records, they cannot be taken as totally reliable. Nevertheless, the best of these provide a useful insight into the Kingdom of Ghana at its height.

The earliest written mention of Ghana was by the eighth-century Arab geographer al-Fazari, who made a brief passing reference to 'the territory of Ghana, the land of gold'. Clearly, Ghana was famed for its trade in gold as far away as the Asian Islamic capital of Baghdad. Later, Arabic writers provided more detailed descriptions of Ghana, and in particular of its capital Kumbi Saleh. The fullest account was written by the eleventh-century Arab geographer al-Bakri:

The king's residence comprises a palace and conical huts, the whole surrounded by a fence like a wall. Around the royal town are huts and groves of thorn trees where live the magicians who control their religious rites. These groves, where they keep their idols and bury their kings, are protected by guards who permit no one to enter or find out what goes on in them.

None of those who belong to the imperial religion may wear tailored garments except the king himself and the heir-presumptive, his sister's son. The rest of the people wear wrappers of cotton, silk or brocade according to their means. Most of the men shave their beards and the women their heads. The king adorns himself with female ornaments around the neck and arms. On his head he wears gold-embroidered caps covered with turbans of finest cotton. He gives audience to the people for the redressing of grievances in a hut around which are placed 10 horses covered in golden cloth. Behind him stand 10 slaves carrying shields and swords mounted with gold. On his right are the sons of vassal kings, their heads plaited with gold and wearing costly garments. On the ground around him are seated his ministers, whilst the governor of the city sits before him. On guard at the door are dogs of fine pedigree, wearing collars adorned with gold and silver. The royal audience is announced by the beating of a drum, called *daba*, made out of a long piece of hollowed-out wood. When the people

have gathered, his co-religionists draw near upon their knees sprinkling dust upon their heads as a sign of respect, whilst the Muslims clap hands as their form of greeting.¹

Based in Islamic Spain, al-Bakri obtained most of his information from Arabic-speaking merchants of the Maghrib. Judging by the extent of the detail recorded, some of these merchants had wide personal experience of travel in west Africa.

The eleventh-century Ghanaian capital, Kumbi Saleh, was described as two separate towns situated a little distance from each other. One was a distinctly Islamic town, set aside for visiting Arab and Berber merchants, which contained many mosques. Although the king's royal town was some 10 kilometres away, the area between the two was covered with the stone and wooden houses of the Soninke.

Clearly, the Muslim visitors to Ghana were impressed by the power and obvious wealth of the king and his court. In particular, they were concerned about the source of the gold, but the Soninke managed to keep this secret from them. They themselves bought the gold in exchange for salt from the Bambuk miners to their south. The gold was then sold to Muslim traders at the capital Kumbi Saleh in exchange for Saharan salt, clothing and other manufactured imports from the Maghrib. It was from the taxing of this trade that the kings of Ghana obtained most of their wealth. According to al-Bakri, the king charged a tax of one dinar of gold for each load of Saharan salt imported into the kingdom and a further two dinars on each load of salt re-exported to the goldfields of the south. (A dinar was an Arab gold coin with a weight and value equivalent to that of 65 grains of barley.) The import and export of gold itself was not actually taxed. But the king ensured his income from it by taking all solid nuggets of gold, leaving just the gold dust for the trade. This enabled the king and his courtiers to display their wealth in gold in the ways described above. The king employed literate Muslims as secretaries and ministers to keep account of trade and taxation.

Figure 6.3 The archaeological site of Kumbi Saleh (in modern Mali).



Source: Dr Kate Leeming (www.kateleeming.com), taken 2009. Reproduced with permission.

The majority of the Ghanaian population got little mention from Arabic writers whose main concern was trade in gold. But we can assume that most people remained farmers, fishermen and herdsman. The king exercised little direct control over the outlying districts of his kingdom. Local government beyond the capital was left in the hands of local hereditary chiefs. These were required to recognise the overall authority of the king and send him regular tribute in the form of food and hunting produce. To ensure their cooperation, the king kept their sons and heirs as hostages at his royal court. These were the 'sons of vassal kings' referred to by al-Bakri. In return for their tribute, the king was expected to protect the people of his kingdom from raids by desert nomads. Although there was no regular standing army, the various districts of the kingdom sent young men for military service when the occasion demanded. According to al-Bakri, the eleventh-century Ghanaian king was able to raise an army of 200,000 men. The army was sometimes used to raid other less powerful peoples to the south. Captives from these raids were sold as slaves to Muslim traders. On the whole, however, this was not a major part of the trade conducted at Kumbi Saleh. The main trade in captives across the desert to Muslim north Africa was from further east in the region of Lake Chad.

Decline of the Kingdom of Ghana

By about 1050 CE, the Kingdom of Ghana had expanded to take over the Islamic Berber town of Awdaghust. Sometime after this, the rulers and people of Ghana became Muslims. It has traditionally been claimed by Arab sources that this was the result of Islamic Berber conquest by followers of the Almoravid movement (see [Chapter 7](#) for discussion of the Almoravids). But the sources are not at all clear on this matter. Several of those that refer to a conquest were written much later and may have been a little overkeen to boast of an Islamic Berber victory over the 'pagan' Sudanese. Careful study of the Arabic sources suggests that it may have been a peaceful conversion. Even if this were so, however, there was undoubtedly some level of conflict in the Sahel between Saharan Berbers and the Soninke of Ghana. This and the wider destructive wars of the Almoravids did much to weaken former trading links. For centuries, the Ghanaian state had thrived on its domination of the gold trade of the western Sudan. But by the end of the twelfth century, Ghana had lost its domination of that trade. With their loss of trade, the newly converted Islamic rulers of Ghana lost the ability to hold together their loose and largely non-Muslim empire.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Bure goldfields were opened up in the woodland savannah country to the south of Ghana. At the same time, new trans-Saharan routes were developed further east of Awdaghust. This gave the southern Soninke and Malinke chiefdoms of the south the chance to assert their independence. In the early 1200s, the southern Soninke chiefdom of Sosso took over most of former Ghana as well as their southern neighbours, the Malinke. As we shall see in [Chapter 7](#), the struggle for Malinke independence from the tyrannical rule of the Sosso gave birth to the great Empire of Mali.

Another reason for the decline of the Kingdom of Ghana was a deterioration in the environment. The Sahel, between the savannah proper and the desert, was already a marginal zone for growing cereal crops. It seems that, by the early thirteenth century, the land was worn out and the region could no longer support a large settled population. At the same time, Berber pastoralists were pushing southwards and overgrazing the region with their flocks and herds. In the early 1200s, therefore, the Soninke farmers and traders of the former Ghanaian kingdom dispersed from Kumbi Saleh. They moved away in small groups to settle in the more favourable regions of the woodland savannah to their south and west. This Soninke dispersal further stimulated the development of trade and state formation already in progress in many parts of west Africa.

Other early west African states and societies

Of all the early Iron Age states of west Africa, we know most about Ghana. This is mainly because it was most involved in the trans-Saharan gold trade and so literate Arabic speakers visited it and wrote about it. But although we know less about them, elsewhere in west Africa populations were similarly growing. Metalworking and agricultural technology were being developed and people were organising themselves in numerous large and small communities throughout the breadth of sub-Saharan west Africa. The larger states seem to have developed near important trading routes and junctions. As with Ghana, rulers were able to increase their wealth and thus their local power by taxing this trade and importing luxury goods.

In the far west, the state of Takrur in the Senegal valley is thought to have emerged as a powerful trading state even earlier than Ghana. Its rulers' wealth was similarly based on trade in salt from nearby Awlil and gold from Bambuk (see [Map 6.2](#)). Takrur's connection with north Africa was along the western coastal route to Sijilmasa and Morocco. The rulers of Takrur adopted Islam as their official state religion early in the eleventh century, before the Soninke of Ghana. As such, they sided with their Muslim Berber neighbours the Almoravids in their conflict with the Soninke.

Across the other side of the west African Sudan, northeast of Lake Chad, there arose the empire of Kanem. This began in about 900 CE with the grouping together of a number of nomadic pastoralist clans under the rule of a single dynasty known as Saifawa. The people of Kanem spoke Kanuri, a branch of the Nilo-Saharan group of languages (see [Map 4.1](#)). Initially, the Kanuri of Kanem remained nomadic. It was not until the eleventh century that their rulers established a fixed capital at Njimi. (The exact site of this capital has not yet been located.) As with Ghana and Takrur, the rulers of Kanem built their wealth and power on their control of trade. Their main trading connection with the north was across the central Sahara to the Fezzan and thence to Tripoli and Egypt. Their main exports across the Sahara were ivory, ostrich feathers and captives to sell as slaves to the Muslims of north Africa. Their raids for captives brought them into frequent conflict with their neighbours to the south. The further history of Kanem will be considered in [Chapter 12](#).

Elsewhere in west Africa, a large number of metalworking, agricultural communities were developing. Some emerged as organised states, others remained small, essentially clan- or village-based communities. The latter were to be found scattered throughout the savannah and forest regions of west Africa. Living in small, family-based villages, they were usually subsistence farmers, that is, they

grew food for home consumption rather than for taxation or trade. They had no bureaucratic government or ruling class as such, being of a small enough scale to settle disputes and make decisions on a purely family basis. Some of these peoples were linked together by common language and came together on occasion to defend themselves from outside attack. But they usually dispersed again as soon as the threat receded. From some of these small beginnings, state organisation emerged, as guardians of religious shrines, military leaders or wealthy traders assumed the positions of rulers. The Yoruba and Hausa states emerged from early origins in this period; they will be discussed in [Chapter 12](#).

Even in the smallest community, metalworking technology could be developed to a fine art. Fine bronze castings have been recovered from Igbo-Ukwu in the southern Nigerian forest (see [Figure 6.4](#)). These have been dated to as early as 900 CE and are believed to be the burial objects of a religious leader or ruler. The peoples of Nigeria had a long history of artistic modelling in clay dating back to at least the Nok culture from before the Common Era. The copper for the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes must have come from Saharan mines such as Azelik in modern Niger, since there is no known source in the region of Nigeria. The methods of casting in bronze may have been developed from ideas passed southward along with the copper. The evidence of the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes proves that even deep in the forest, people were to some extent connected with the long-distance trading networks of the savannah and the Sahel.

Figure 6.4 Left: A bronze ceremonial wine bowl, Igbo-Ukwu, eastern Nigeria, ninth century ce. Right: A 'lost-wax' cast vessel in the form of a shell surmounted by a leopard, Igbo-Ukwu, eastern Nigeria, ninth century ce.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Getty Images.



Source: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.



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CHAPTER 7

Islam and the Sudanic states of west Africa

The Almoravids

Origins

We saw in [Chapter 6](#) that by the end of the ninth century, the Berbers of the western Sahara had largely converted to Islam. It was they who first brought Islam to the western Sudan. Islam provided Berber pastoralists and traders with a certain shared sense of ‘brotherhood’. It also gave additional purpose to their territorial rivalry with the Sudanese farmers of the Sahel. In the forefront of this rivalry were the Lamtuna branch of the Sanhaja Berbers and the Soninke of Ghana. Early in the eleventh century, the Soninke of Ghana extended their control over the Muslim town of Awdaghust and the Lamtuna Sanhaja of the surrounding region. Some Sanhaja leaders viewed this territorial rivalry in terms of a religious war, but they were unable to inspire their followers with the fervour of a *jihad* (a holy war).

By this time, it was not unusual for wealthy Berber leaders to go on religious pilgrimage to Mecca. Thus it was in 1036 that a certain Sanhaja chief on his return from Mecca visited the Muslim scholars at Qayrawan in north Africa. He appears to have poured out his troubles to them about the lack of Islamic fervour among his people and their suffering at the hands of the ‘infidel’ Sudanese. The result of his visit to Qayrawan was that he brought home with him to the southwestern Sahara a northern Berber scholar named Abdallah ibn Yasin.

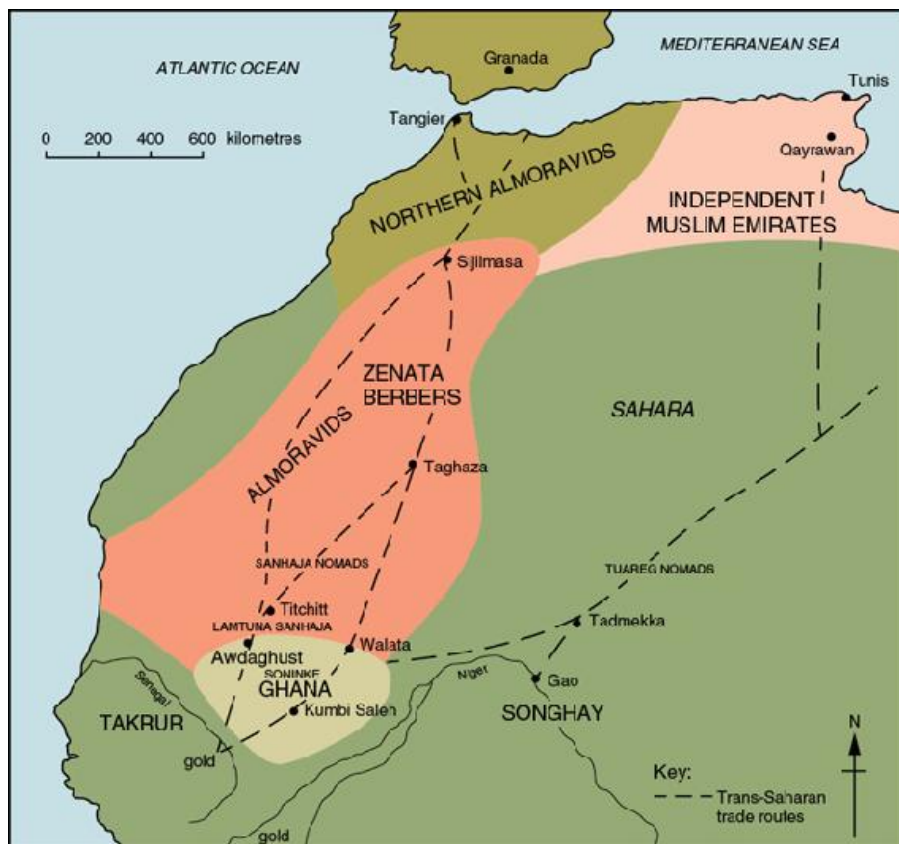
Abdallah was shocked to find so little observance of the teachings of Islam among these nominally Muslim Berbers. Most were illiterate and knew little of the Qur’an. In addition, they retained many of their pre-Islamic religious ideas and practices. Like later Sudanese converts to Islam, many of these southern Berber Muslims managed to combine belief in the old religion and the new. To Abdallah, it was clear that

the lack of strict Islamic observance was largely to blame for the Sanhaja's lack of unity and purpose and their loss of ground to the 'pagan' Soninke. But Abdallah's initial attempts to reconvert the coastal Juddala Sanhaja ended in failure. He then withdrew to a remote site on the Mauritanian coast. A fortress or place of retreat of this kind was known in Arabic as a *ribat*. There he built up a small but dedicated body of faithful Islamic followers referred to as al-Murabitun or 'the Almoravids'. Abdallah and the Almoravids preached the observance of strict Islamic law and the waging of jihad against the infidel (unbeliever).

The spread of the Almoravids

The message of the Almoravids found its greatest initial appeal among the Lamtuna, those Sanhaja nomads in greatest conflict with the Soninke. During the early 1040s, the bulk of the Lamtuna joined the Almoravid movement. Prominent among the early converts were Yahya ibn Umar and his brother Abu Bakr ibn Umar, the sons of a Lamtuna chief. They joined Abdallah ibn Yasin in leading the conquest and conversion of the Sanhaja of the western Sahara. The Almoravid movement brought the rival Sanhaja clans together in a new form of unity. It provided them with a chance to escape from the domination of the Zenata Berbers of Sijilmasa in the north and the Soninke of Ghana in the south. Within a few years, Yahya and Abu Bakr had moulded together a powerful mass army. What it lacked in military discipline it made up for in speed and enthusiasm. Its conquests were fired by religious fervour and the prospect of booty.

The Almoravid Empire in the eleventh century



By 1055, the Almoravid armies had taken Sijilmasa in the north and Awdaghust in the south. This gave them control of the trans-Saharan gold trade. The extent of their early success prompted these Sanhaja nomads to extend their conquests beyond the desert to the mountains and plains of Morocco. At this point, however, two of their principal leaders were killed in battle and some of the Almoravids' early unity was lost. Yahya died in 1056 and Abdallah in 1059. Abu Bakr assumed the nominal leadership of the movement, but the conquered territory, stretching from north to south across the Sahara, had become too big for one leader to control. As Abu Bakr returned to the south to carry the jihad against the Sudanese, he left his cousin Yusuf ibn Tashufin in control of the north. From then on the movement was effectively split in two, as Yusuf carried the Almoravid army through Morocco and into southern Spain (see [Map 7.1](#)).

The southern Almoravids have, in the past, been credited with conquering the Kingdom of Ghana in 1076. As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), recent study of contemporary Arabic sources has thrown some doubt on the idea of an actual conquest. What is certain is that there was some armed conflict between Almoravids and Soninke. The latter were

pushed back from Awdaghust and trade was disrupted. Sometime in the last quarter of the eleventh century, the Soninke rulers of Ghana converted to Islam – whether by conquest or persuasion remains uncertain. It may have been a deliberate political tactic in order to re-establish trading links with the now firmly Islamic Sanhaja. Certainly, in the early twelfth century, Ghana was both Islamic and independent.

On the death of Abu Bakr in 1087, much of the strength of the southern Almoravid army was drained away northwards. Many of their best fighting men were tempted to leave the southern desert and returned to join Yusuf in pushing forward the conquest of north Africa. Weakened by this desertion and the lack of further conquests, southern Sanhaja unity declined. This allowed the sub-Saharan Soninke and later the Malinke to re-expand at their expense.

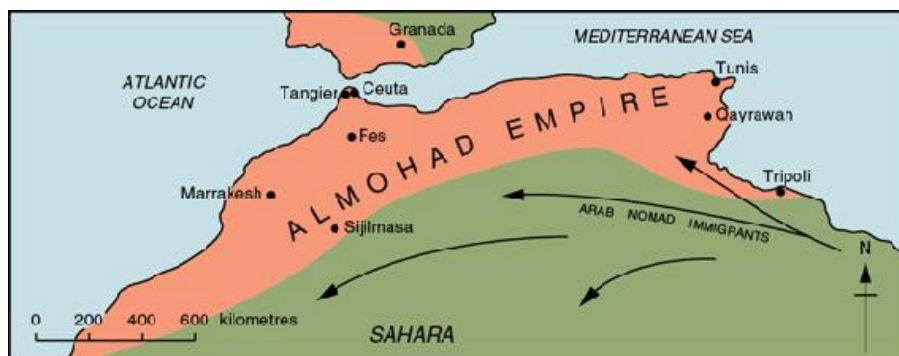
The Muslim states of north Africa, 1100–1500

Meanwhile, in their northern empire of Morocco and southern Spain, the former nomads of the desert were soon corrupted by the wealth and power of a settled existence. Their corruption and loss of religious piety provoked reaction among the Berbers of north Africa. In the 1140s, this reaction erupted in a jihad against the Almoravids themselves. It was led by Abd al-Mu'min who united the north African Berbers, overthrew the Almoravid Sanhaja and founded the Almohad state. In effect, the Almohad jihad continued the work of the Almoravids in unifying the whole of the Maghrib (see [Map 7.2](#)). This was complete by the end of the twelfth century. During this period, the north African Berbers became more thoroughly Islamised and newly immigrant Arab nomads extended the Arabic language and culture into the rural areas.

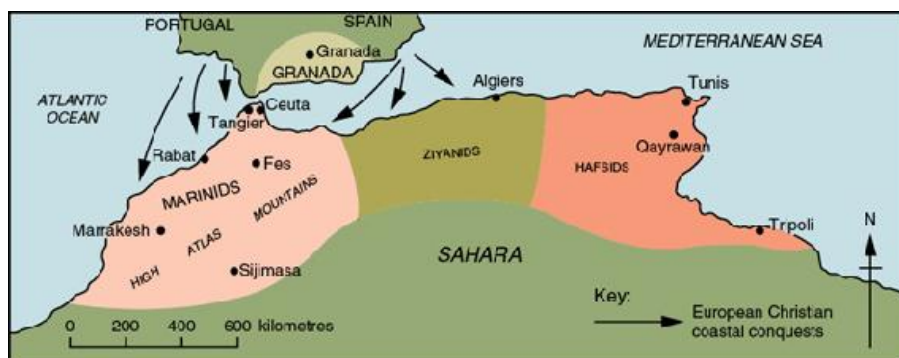
One of the most important consequences of this was the spread of literacy through the Muslim world of northern and western Africa. Literacy, usually in Arabic, was spread through the teaching of the Qur'an. Thus the mosques became centres of learning. In this way, the peoples of northern and western Africa were exposed to and contributed to the intellectual achievements of the Muslim world. These achievements were considerable, especially in the fields of mathematics and science; it was people from this vast Muslim-Arab world who developed our modern numeral system based on counting from 1 to 10. They invented algebra, the use of the decimal point and the number zero – a mathematical concept missed by the Ancient Greeks. They developed physics and astronomy. They studied chemistry and were the first people to separate medicine from religion and develop it as a secular science. As we shall see later in this

chapter, the peoples of the western Sudan became part of this Muslim intellectual tradition.

The Almohad Empire in the twelfth century



Muslim states of north Africa in the fifteenth century



The Berbers of the Maghrib had a long tradition of regional independence (see [Chapter 5](#)) and this tendency reasserted itself in the thirteenth century as the Almohad Empire split into three rival states. At the same time, Muslims were pushed out of Spain and into north Africa by the advancing armies of the Christian kingdoms of Aragon, Castile and Portugal. The Spanish Inquisition and the forced conversion of thousands of Jews as well as Muslims drove many to flee to north Africa. Jews and Judaism had been an important element in the commercial centres of Muslim Spain, and they now strengthened the Jewish communities in the states of the Maghrib. In 1415, the Christian Portuguese extended their 'Reconquista' to north

Africa itself, with the capture of the coastal fortress of Ceuta (see [Map 7.3](#)). In the century that followed, Spain and Portugal established a number of trading ports along the north African coast. In 1492, the Spanish ended nearly eight centuries of Muslim rule in southern Spain with the defeat of Granada.

Further expansion of the gold trade

The Almoravid and Almohad states of north Africa gave a great boost to the trans-Saharan gold trade. Like the Fatimids of Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Almoravids and Almohads of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries minted their own gold coins. With increasing trade between Christian Europe and Muslim north Africa and Asia, by the thirteenth century Europe also began experiencing an economic revival. European kings and princes turned increasingly from silver and copper to gold for minting their coins. And most of that gold came from south of the Sahara. It has been estimated that as much as two-thirds of the gold circulating in Europe and north Africa in the fourteenth century came from trade with the western Sudan. Thus, although initial Almoravid conflict with the Soninke of Ghana may have disrupted trading contacts, this was clearly only temporary. In fact, the Almoravid unification of the Saharan Berbers and the spread of Islam among west African rulers did much to stabilise and expand the trans-Saharan trade in gold. As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), new sources of gold were opened up and Ghana lost its domination of the trade. This opened the way for the rise of new west African states, in particular the rise of Mali.

The Empire of Mali

Evidence

Evidence for the history of this remarkable west African state is of two types: written accounts by contemporary north African Muslims and Mande oral tradition, in particular what is known as the *Sunjata* epic. The principal written accounts, both fourteenth century, are those of the Tunisian-Berber intellectual and civil servant Ibn Khaldun and the great Algerian writer and traveller Ibn Battuta. Ibn Khaldun's history, mostly relating to north Africa, was derived from a wide range of sources, while Ibn Battuta visited Mali at the height of its power in 1352. His first-hand observations provide a vivid insight into life at the Saharan oases and the Malian capital of Niani. He also recorded some of the oral traditions that he heard recited at the royal court.

The *Sunjata* epic

In preliterate days in African society, oral traditions have been the principal means of handing down the history and culture of the society from one generation to the next. Where powerful kingdoms were concerned, the traditions have been strongest, and they have been most faithfully learned and handed down, often through poetic recitations, through many generations. Many of these traditions started as praise poems, recited and sometimes sung, by official poets and musicians of the royal court. They recounted the exploits of the ruler and his antecedents. Such was the case with the *Sunjata* epic, which still retains status in contemporary Mande society as a major work of oral history, literature and performance art. Presented in modern times primarily as performance literature, the *Sunjata* epic has been passed down through many generations of griots or performers. At each passing, it has been subject to the interpretation and 'poetic licence' of the new performer. Nevertheless, the basic outline of the *Sunjata* story remains consistent and other sources suggest that a figure similar to Sunjata in the *Sunjata* epic really did expand the Mali kingdom sometime around 1200 CE.

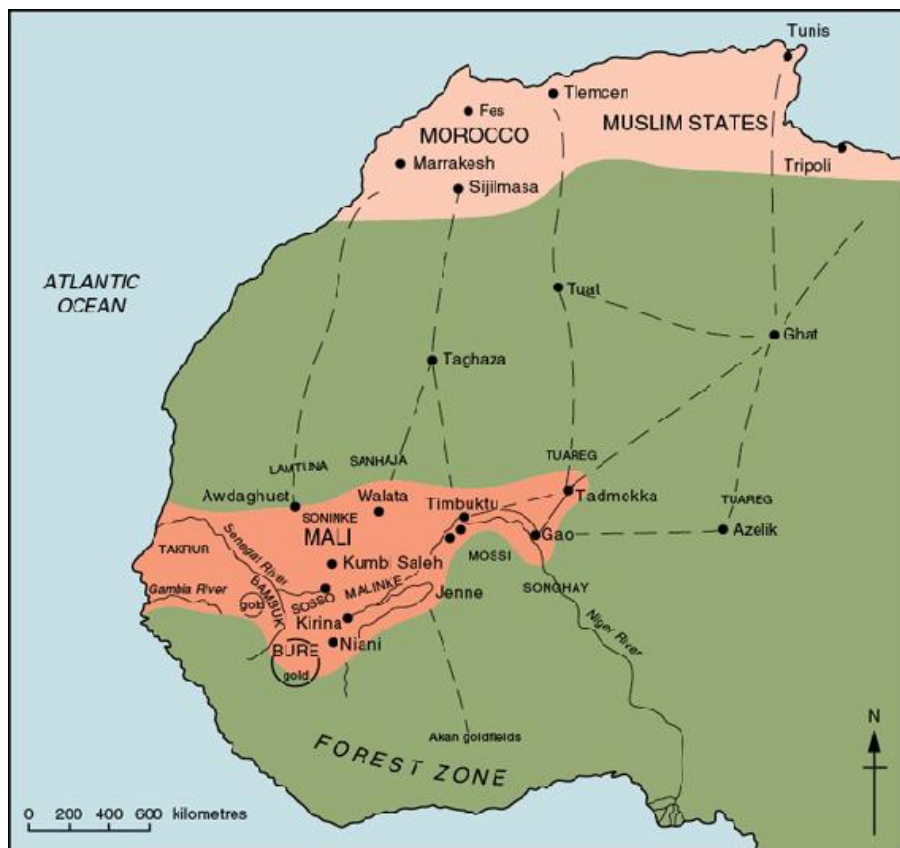
Origins and expansion

The main new source of gold was at Bure in the savannah country of the upper Niger River. This brought the southern Soninke and Malinke-speaking peoples of the savannah more thoroughly into the great Sudanese trading network. The first to take full advantage of this were the Sosso, a branch of the southern Soninke. Under the leadership of Sumanguru of the Kante clan, the Sosso quickly established a new and separate state, independent of Ghana. The Sosso state was built mainly on raid and conquest, killing rulers and seizing tribute. During the early 1220s, Sumanguru's army raided the Malinke to his south and then attacked the northern Soninke of Ghana, sacking their capital in about 1224.

Sunjata of the Keita clan, a Malinke survivor of the Sosso raids, set about organising Malinke resistance. He brought a number of Malinke chiefdoms into an alliance under his authority. In 1235, he led a Malinke army against the Sosso of Sumanguru, whom he defeated in battle at Kirina, near modern Bamako. With the defeat of Sumanguru, Sunjata took control of all the Soninke peoples recently conquered by the Sosso, including much of former Ghana.

Within a very few years, Sunjata had built up a vast empire, known to us as Mali. The capital was built at Niani in the southern savannah country of the upper Niger valley near the goldfields of Bure. Even in Sunjata's lifetime, the Empire of Mali extended from the fringes of the forest in the southwest through the savannah country of the Malinke and southern Soninke to the Sahel of former Ghana (see [Map 7.4](#)). Awdaghust remained in the hands of the Sanhaja, but by then the more easterly town of Walata had become the main southern desert 'port' for the trans-Saharan trade. And whereas Ghana at its height had barely reached the upper Niger Delta, Sunjata's successors extended the empire's boundaries to include Timbuktu and the middle Niger Bend. At its height in the fourteenth century, the Empire of Mali stretched from the Atlantic south of the Senegal River to the Songhay capital of Gao on the east of the middle Niger Bend. In the south, it reached the forest and included the goldfields of Bure and Bambuk, while in the north it stretched across the Sahel to include the southern Saharan 'ports' of Walata and Tadmekka.

The Empire of Mali in the fourteenth century



Religion and kingship

The traditional religion of the Malinke was like that of many west African agricultural peoples. The core of their belief was that it was the 'spirits of the land' who ensured the success of their crops. The earliest farmers to have settled in a particular region were believed to have made a deal with the spirits to ensure the successful production of their crops. And it was through spiritual contact with their ancestors that the people of the present were able to keep in touch with the original settlers and thus with the 'spirits of the land'. The village head or chief, the *mansa* in Malinke, was believed to be the person most directly descended from the earliest farmers, and the title of *mansa* was passed on dynastically through the generations. He was the most direct link with the 'spirits of the land' on whom continued production of their crops depended. The *mansa*, as guardian of the ancestors, was thus both the religious and secular leader of his people.

When Sunjata formed his Malinke alliance against the Sosso, he persuaded the other Malinke *mansas* to surrender their titles to him. He thus became the sole *mansa*, the religious and secular leader of all

the Malinke people and, in due course, of the whole of the Empire of Mali. As the power of the *mansa* increased, so did his religious significance. The *mansa*'s central religious role within the empire was crucial to the people's survival and he was thus treated with exaggerated respect. He lived apart from his subjects, who approached him on their knees. He was surrounded by displays of great wealth and ceremonial regalia. This emphasised his power and dignity, and no doubt helped instil respect and obedience to his rule. But despite the misunderstanding of outsiders, he was not a 'divine king' as it was understood in Ancient Egypt.

Most of the rulers of Mali after Sunjata were Muslim, some more firmly so than others. A number made pilgrimages to Mecca, the most famous being the huge and lavish pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in 1324–5. Traders and court officials in the towns, those most detached from the traditional values of the land, accepted Islam more willingly and thoroughly than the bulk of rural commoners. The latter, most of whom were peasant farmers, were still closely dependent on the goodwill of the 'spirits of the land'. Although the rulers of Mali accepted Islam, they never totally rejected their national traditional religion. To have done so would have lost them the support of their farming subjects, who largely adhered to indigenous religious beliefs and practices.

The administration of the empire

The political organisation of Mali was in many ways similar to that of Ghana. A number of literate Muslims were employed at court as scribes and treasurers to carry out most of the administrative work. In the outlying districts of the empire, traditional rulers were left in place, provided they collected and forwarded tributes to the capital. The *mansa* kept a large standing army and the battalion commanders were among the more important officials at the royal court. Each army battalion consisted of a small élite corps of horsemen and a large body of foot soldiers armed with bows and spears. The army was used to protect the empire from outside attack, to patrol trading routes and to ensure that district chiefs paid their tribute to the king. The main source of royal income besides tribute was a tax on trade. As with the kings of Ghana, the *mansa* of Mali levied a tax on all goods passing in, out of and through the empire.

Figure 7.1 The Great Mosque of Djenné, with the traditional weekly market in the foreground. It is the largest mud brick building in the world and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The current building is

the third version and was built in 1907. The poles sticking out of the walls are for structural stability. They are also considered decorative and are used as exterior scaffolding during the replastering, which takes place during the annual festival of *Crepissage*.



Source: oversnap/iStock.

The economy

The main economic basis of the empire was the agricultural production of the rural areas. In this respect, Mali was far better situated than its predecessor Ghana. It is significant that Niani, the capital of Mali, was centred in the south of the country in the heart of some of the most productive land within the empire. Unlike Sahelian Ghana, the Empire of Mali stretched right across the southern savannah where rainfall was adequate to produce regular food surpluses. Different areas specialised in different crops. The main savannah crops were sorghum and millet, with rice being produced in the Gambia valley and around the upper Niger floodplain. This left the more northerly and drier Sahelian grasslands for the specialist grazing of camels, sheep and goats. Food was traded from one district to another and in particular from the savannah and Niger floodplain to the trading towns of the Sahel. Most of the empire's food was produced by independent peasant farmers living fairly close together in small family villages. They paid a proportion of the surplus to their traditional district chief who kept a portion and forwarded the rest to

the central government. At the same time, the *mansa* and his army commanders controlled their own 'state' farms, where slaves were organised to produce food for the army and the court.

The main economic activity observed by outsiders was, of course, the gold trade; and control of this, as we have seen, was a major stimulus behind the founding of the state. But although the rulers of Mali taxed the trade that passed through the empire, they did not exercise direct control over the mining of gold. The peoples of the goldfields were particularly anxious to maintain their independence. They were prepared to send tribute of gold nuggets to the *mansa* and to pay a tax on their imports of salt. But whenever the rulers of Mali tried to interfere directly with their mining, the miners themselves simply ceased production. They even ceased production when the *mansa* of Mali tried to convert them to Islam, so that project was abandoned.

Within the Mali Empire, a class of professional traders developed called Wangara in the west and Dyula in the east. They were Malinke, Bamana or Soninke in origin and were usually practising Muslims. They carried the trade of the empire to the furthest corners of west Africa. They penetrated the forest to trade for kola nuts and they carried these, together with surplus food, hunting produce (meat, skins, furs, ivory) and gold of west Africa to the trading towns of the Sahel: Walata, Tadmekka, Timbuktu and Gao. It was Dyula traders from Mali who, in the late fourteenth century, penetrated south to the Akan forest of modern Ghana (see [Chapter 12](#)). From there they brought a whole new field of gold production into the trans-Saharan network. The opening of the Akan goldfields shifted the centre of the gold trade further eastwards, enabling Timbuktu and Jenne to replace Walata as major 'ports' of exchange.

Sometime during the fourteenth century, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean were introduced as currency into the internal trade of the western Sudan. This appears to have been a deliberate move encouraged by the government. It improved the collection of taxation and eased the internal exchange of food and other goods. But gold dust and salt remained the main mediums of exchange in the long-distance trade of the Sahara.

Mali in the fourteenth century

The Empire of Mali reached the height of its power and fame in the fourteenth century. Much depended in the kingdom on the personal power of the ruler. A series of dynastic struggles and short-lived reigns had temporarily weakened the power of the monarchy towards the

end of the thirteenth century. When that happened, outlying provinces asserted their independence and failed to pay tribute. But the monarchy recovered in the fourteenth century with the reigns of two particularly effective rulers: Mansa Musa (1312–37) and Mansa Sulayman (1341–60).

Mansa Musa brought Mali to the notice of the rest of the Muslim world with his famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–5. He arrived in Cairo at the head of a huge caravan, which included 100 camel-loads of gold. There, he was received with great respect as a fellow Muslim by the Sultan of Egypt. Musa spent lavishly in Egypt, giving away so many gold gifts that the value of gold in Cairo fell and did not recover for a number of years. All who met him were impressed by his wealth, generosity and intellectual powers.

Figure 7.2 The Djinguereber Mosque in Timbuktu, the oldest mosque south of the Sahara. The mosque is constructed of round mud bricks and stone rubble with clay rendering. The foundation of the mosque in 1325 is attributed to Mansa Musa, king of Mali.



Source: Alan Tobey/iStock.

On his return from Mecca, Musa brought back from Egypt an architect who redesigned the mosque of Gao, which had recently been added to the empire. A number of other mosques were built during Musa's reign. He had always encouraged the development of learning and the expansion of Islam. In the early years of his reign, Musa had sent Sudanese scholars to the Moroccan 'university' of Fes (today's Fez). By the end of his reign, Sudanese scholars were setting up their own centres of learning and Qur'anic study, particularly at Timbuktu.

The pilgrimage of Mansa Musa excited the interest of other Muslim scholars, among them Ibn Battuta, the Berber geographer from Tangier. After many years of travelling throughout the Muslim world of Asia, Ibn Battuta visited Mali during the reign of Musa's brother Mansa Sulayman. Ibn Battuta set off in 1352, travelling via the salt-producing oasis of Taghaza and the Sahelian trading town of Walata. Ibn Battuta's account of his journey has become a major source for our knowledge of fourteenth-century Mali:

I set off at the beginning of God's month of Muharram in the year 753 [February 1352 CE] with a caravan whose leader was Abu Muhammad Yandakan al-Masufi, may God have mercy on him. In the caravan was a company of merchants of Sijilmasa and others. After 25 days we arrived at Taghaza. This is a village with nothing good about it. One of its marvels is that its houses and mosque are of rock salt and its roofs of camel skins. It has no trees, but is nothing but sand with a salt mine. They dig in the earth for the salt, which is found in great slabs lying one upon the other as though they have been shaped and placed underground. A camel carries two slabs of it. Nobody lives there except the slaves of the Masufa [a Berber people] who dig for the salt. They live on the dates imported to them from Dar'a and Sijilmasa, on camel-meat, and on *anili* imported from the land of Sudan [the land of the black peoples south of the Sahara]. ...

We stayed there for ten days, under strain because the water there is brackish. It is the most fly-ridden of places.

Water is taken on there for entering the wilderness which comes after it. This is a distance of ten days without water except rarely. As for us, we found plenty of water there in pools left by the rain. On one day we found a pool between two rocky hillocks with sweet water in it, so we renewed our water supplies and washed our clothes. ...

In those days we used to go on ahead of the caravan and whenever we found a place suitable for grazing we pastured the beasts there. This we continued to do till a man named Ibn Ziri became lost in the desert. After that we neither went on ahead nor lagged behind.¹

Ibn Battuta spent eight comfortable months at the Malian capital of Niani before returning home via Timbuktu, Gao, Takedda (Azelik) and Tuat (see [Map 7.4](#)). At first highly critical of what he saw as the Malinke's dull diet of pounded millet, honey and milk, Ibn Battuta

soon warmed to them for their hospitality and love of justice. Of the latter, he wrote:

[They] possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan (the *mansa*) shows no mercy to any one guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence.²

The fame of Mali in the fourteenth century was such that it began to gain particular mention in the maps European geographers were producing at that time. In one map produced in 1375, the king of Mali is shown seated on a throne in the centre of west Africa (see [Figure 7.3](#)). He is holding a nugget of gold in his right hand and approaching from a tented settlement in the desert is a veiled Sanhaja Berber riding on a camel.

Figure 7.3 Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375, showing Mansa Musa, king of Mali, seated on his throne, holding a nugget of gold. Mali at the time was the main source of gold for the coinage of north Africa and western Europe.



Source: Abraham Cresques/Getty Images.

The decline of Mali

As we have seen, the strength and success of the Malian empire depended on the strength of the ruler at the centre. In the late fourteenth century, the power of the *mansas* declined through a series of weak rulers, brief reigns and dynastic struggle. The outer provinces seized the opportunity to assert their independence. Perhaps the most important of those to break away, as we shall see in the following section, were the Songhay of the eastern Niger Bend. At the same time, the wealth of the empire was sapped by raids from the Mossi in the south and the Tuareg in the north.

The Mossi

The Mossi came from savannah country south of the Niger Bend. It was a region never brought within the Empire of Mali. A ruling aristocracy had organised a number of Mossi states. They exercised control through their small but effective raiding bands of well-armed horsemen. With these armies, the Mossi aristocracy exacted tribute from their peasantry and grew rich through raids and pillage. They quickly seized on the opportunity of a weakening Mali Empire. One of their northern raids reached as far as Walata in the early 1480s.

Timbuktu and the Tuareg

Timbuktu had originally been founded as a tented settlement of Tuareg Berbers. It was a southern grazing settlement for their flocks and herds and also a link-up point with the trans-Saharan trade. During the reign of Sunjata or his successor, it had been captured from the Tuareg and brought within the Mali Empire. More permanent houses were constructed of mud brick and, as we have seen, Timbuktu became an important centre for Muslim traders and scholars, Sudanese as well as Berber. As central Malian authority declined, Tuareg nomads raided the town in the early 1400s, finally capturing it in 1433. The Tuareg appreciated that Timbuktu was a potential source of wealth. They did not disrupt the way of life within the town, but simply redirected its taxes from the Malian capital to themselves. In fact, the economic and intellectual life of Timbuktu expanded as, in about 1450, further Berber Muslim merchants and scholars moved there from Walata. Timbuktu was to reach the height of its wealth and fame in the sixteenth century as it was brought within the expanding Empire of Songhay.

Mali's loss of Timbuktu was a signal of its final decline and displacement by Songhay. By 1500, the formerly great Mali Empire

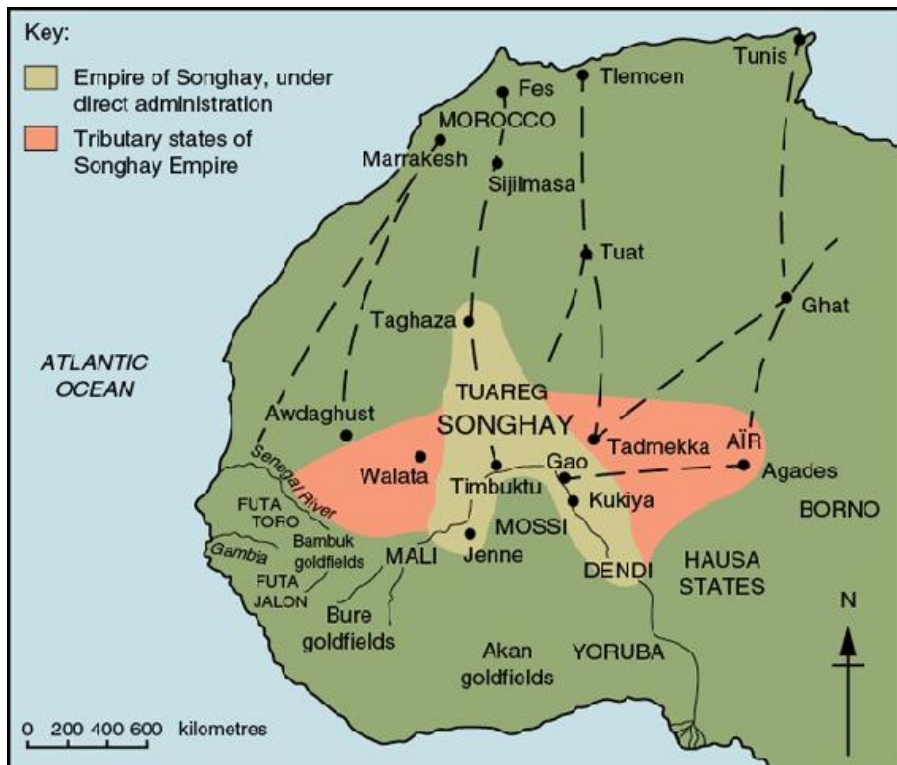
had contracted down to little more than its Malinke heartland. Most non-Malinke peoples had asserted their independence. By the seventeenth century, even this Malinke federation had reverted into rule by individual village *mansas*. Even so, within the Malinke heartland, the idea that the Mali Empire might someday be revived was to live on right into the nineteenth century (see [Chapter 16](#)).

The origins and rise of Songhay

Origins of the Songhay state

The heartland of Songhay lay along the middle Niger River southeast of Gao (see [Map 7.5](#)). The principal peoples of the region were Do farmers, Gow hunters related to the Mossi, and Sorko fishermen. The latter were in the strongest position to dominate the region. From at least as early as the eighth century, Sorko fishermen began to extend their territory upstream towards the Niger Bend. Their canoes gave them mastery of the river, which they used as a trading route, exchanging food from one region to another. As experienced fishermen and hunters of the hippopotamus, it was easy for them to adapt their canoes for military use. They set up trading villages along the middle Niger from which they dominated nearby communities of peasant farmers. By the ninth century, this region of the middle Niger had been welded together into the single state of ‘Songhay’, with its capital at Kukiya. By then, the people of Songhay were in regular contact with Muslim traders who had settled at Gao.

The Songhay Empire in the early sixteenth century



The trading town of Gao was founded by Berber and, possibly, Egyptian merchants who were attracted to the region by the Bambuk gold trade of Ghana. It became the trans-Saharan trading link of the central and eastern Sahara. The farmers and fishermen of Songhay provided the merchants of Gao with food in exchange for salt as well as cloth and other products from north Africa. Through these contacts, the rulers of Songhay became at least nominally Muslim by the beginning of the eleventh century, earlier than either Takrur or Ghana. It was not long before Gao became the new capital of Songhay. Gao and other western parts of Songhay were brought within the boundaries of Mali during the fourteenth century. But the bulk of Songhay remained beyond the reach of Mali's tax-collecting armies.

With the decline of Mali in the fifteenth century, Songhay showed its independence. Its Sonni dynasty built up a powerful army of horsemen and war canoes. During the reign of Sonni Sulayman Dandi, the Songhay army began to extend its territory upstream along the Niger bend. It was during the reign of Sulayman Dandi's successor Sonni Ali the Great (1464–92) that Songhay became an empire, totally eclipsing Mali.

Figure 7.4 Fishermen casting their nets on the Niger River, near



Source: Michele Alfieri/iStock.

Sonni Ali and the founding of the Songhay Empire

Sonni Ali began his reign of conquests by capturing Timbuktu from the Tuareg in 1468. Thereafter, much of his reign was taken up with fighting off Tuareg raiders from the southern desert and extending the empire by military conquest. His army had a reputation in Songhay oral tradition of having never been beaten. Certainly, he was a formidable military general who extended the Songhay Empire deep into the desert in the north and as far as Jenne in the southwest. The Mossi were pushed back south of the Niger in the late 1480s and Songhay's army raided deep into Mossi territory. Although it was a fruitful field for further raiding, this turbulent savannah territory was never actually brought within the Songhay Empire.

Sonni Ali's raids on Muslim Timbuktu, his relentless pursuit of the Tuareg and his general lack of respect for Islam led to his being highly criticised by Arabic historians. They portrayed him as a ruthless tyrant and oppressor. Scholarship in Timbuktu undoubtedly suffered during his reign, but Sonni Ali is remembered in Songhay oral tradition as a great conquering hero and founder of the Songhay Empire. After Sonni Ali's death in 1492, his heir was quickly ousted by one of his

generals, Muhammad Ture, a devout Muslim of Soninke origin.

Songhay under the Askiya dynasty

Muhammad Ture (1493–1528), founder of the Askiya (also known as Askia) dynasty, strengthened the administration of the empire and consolidated Ali's conquests. He used Islam to reinforce his authority and unite his far-flung empire. And he justified a major raid against the Mossi in 1498 by declaring it a jihad. Askiya Muhammad recognised the importance of Islam to the trans-Saharan trade. He let the rest of the Muslim world know of his concern for the faith when he went on pilgrimage to Mecca soon after his accession. While in Cairo, he persuaded the caliph of Egypt to recognise him as the 'caliph' of the whole Sudan. On his return from Mecca, Askiya Muhammad revived Timbuktu as a great centre of Islamic learning. But, at the same time, he did not force the Islamic faith on the common people and the bulk of them retained their traditional religious beliefs.

Partly as a result of his promotion of Islam, Askiya Muhammad's reign saw a general revival of trans-Saharan trade. This, in turn, increased the wealth of Songhay. He ensured that Songhay benefited more directly from this trade by extending the empire further into the desert. His armies drove back the Tuareg of the southern Sahara, capturing Aïr in the east and the salt-producing centre of Taghaza in the north (see [Map 7.5](#)). And although Songhay exercised little direct control over the Hausa states to the southeast, these rich and varied communities were brought into the empire's broader trading network. (For the further history of the Hausa states, see [Chapter 12](#).)

The administration of Songhay was more centralised than that of Mali. As new provinces were conquered for the empire, traditional rulers were replaced by royal appointees. They were usually members of the royal family or trusted servants. Their positions were not hereditary and these provincial governors depended on the king for their appointment. Each governor recruited his own local army, which was used for ensuring the regular payment of tribute by the farmers of the province. The removal of traditional rulers and the centralisation of power helped prevent provinces from breaking away during periods of dynastic dispute or rule by weak kings. There were, in fact, frequent dynastic disputes after the ageing Askiya Muhammad was deposed by his son in 1528. But Songhay held together as a great trading empire until the Moroccan invasion of 1591 (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Figure 7.5 The tomb at Gao of Muhammad Ture, founder of the

Askiya dynasty of Songhay. Muhammad used Islam to strengthen his authority and unite his far-flung empire.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Getty Images.

The main sources of government income were, as in Mali, tribute from the provinces, royal farms in the Niger floodplain and the Songhay heartland, and taxes on trade. The principal currency of long-distance trade was salt. Cowrie shells were used for general internal trade. The items of trade were much the same as those for Mali. Gold provided the main impetus for trans-Saharan trade, to which were added kola nuts from the southern forest and captives for sale as slaves in Muslim north Africa. The captives mostly came from raids into Mossi territory south of the Niger Bend. Food was the main staple of internal trade, while imports from north Africa, besides Saharan salt, included luxury goods, cloth, cowries and horses for the military. Cloth was widely woven from local Sudanese cotton, and in towns like Jenne, Timbuktu and Gao, woollen cloth and linen from north Africa was unravelled and rewoven according to local preference.

Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Fasi, a young Moroccan educated at Fes, visited the country in 1510 and again in 1513. Writing in Italian under the name of Leo Africanus (following his capture by Christians and forced conversion to Christianity), he published a vivid and detailed description of Songhay at its height under the rule of Askiya

Muhammad. On the town of Timbuktu, Africanus wrote:

Here are many shops of craftsmen and merchants, especially those who weave linen and cotton cloth. To this place Barbarie [Berber] merchants bring cloth from Europe. All the women of this region except maidservants go with their faces covered, and sell all necessary kinds of food. The inhabitants are exceedingly rich, so much so that the present king has married both his daughters to two rich merchants. There are many wells here containing very sweet water, and when the River Niger floods they convey its water by channels to the town. The region produces corn, cattle, milk and butter in great abundance, but salt is very scarce for it is brought here by land from Tegaza [Taghaza] which is five hundred miles [800 kilometres] distant. When I myself was here, I saw one camel's load of salt sold for 80 ducats [a gold coin widespread in Europe at the time] ...

Figure 7.6 Timbuktu, from a German drawing dated 1858. The tall towers in the background are the minarets of mosques. Timbuktu was a major centre of Islamic scholarship from the fourteenth century.



The rich king of Tombuto [governor of Timbuktu] has many articles of gold, and he keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court. When he travels anywhere he rides upon a camel which is led by some of his noblemen. He travels likewise when he goes to

war and all his soldiers ride upon horses. Attending him he has always three thousand horsemen, and a great number of footmen armed with poisoned arrows. They often have skirmishes with those that refuse to pay tribute, and as many as they take they sell to the merchants of Tombuto. ...

Here there are many doctors, judges, priests and other learned men that are well maintained at the king's cost. Various manuscripts and written books are brought here out of Barbarie and sold for more money than any other merchandise. The coin of Tombuto is of gold without any stamp or superscription, but in matters of small value they use certain shells brought here from Persia, four hundred of which are worth a ducat and six pieces of their own gold coin each of which weighs two-thirds of an ounce.³

The Fulbe (or Fulani)

One particular group of people inhabiting the Sahelian and savannah grasslands of this period were the Fulbe (sometimes referred to as Peuhl and more commonly known in the eastern regions of west Africa as Fulani). They were physically distinct from the bulk of black Sudanese, being of paler skin and more like the Berbers in appearance. But, unlike the Berbers, they spoke a language belonging to the Niger-Congo group. In the eleventh century, the Fulbe lived in the Senegambia region where they practised nomadic pastoralism among the predominantly agricultural Sudanese. Between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, the Fulbe gradually extended their grazing territory over much of the savannah of west Africa, from Futa Toro in the west to Borno in the east. They did not conquer or control the agricultural peoples but established their camps in between their settlements. Some Fulbe adopted settled agricultural practices and blended with the local population. Others remained distinctly pastoralist and retained a separate Fulbe language and culture. As we shall see in [Chapter 16](#), the Fulbe were destined to play an important role in west African history in the early nineteenth century.



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- 1 Levtzion, N. and Hopkins, J.E.P. (eds) (1981) *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, trans. J.E.P. Hopkins (CUP: Cambridge), p. 782.
- 2 Bovill, E.W. (1968) *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, 2nd edn (OUP: Oxford), p. 95.
- 3 Africanus, L. (1896) *History and Description of Africa*, trans. J. Pory and ed. R. Brown, London, vol. III, pp. 824–7; quoted in Bovill, E.W. (1968) *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (OUP: Oxford), pp. 147–50.

SECTION 4



RELIGION, TRADE AND CHIEFTAINCY IN EASTERN, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



Chapters 8, 9 and 10 consider eastern, central and southern Africa from the ninth to the sixteenth century.

In the north of this region, the Ethiopian inheritors of the Aksumite kingdom pursued their own unique branch of Christianity, their rulers conflating sacred and temporal kingship. Whatever their religious claims, however, royal authority rested firmly on military power, as successive rulers used military conquest to extend their kingdom southwards. This inevitably led to a clash with Muslim sultanates that had for some centuries been pushing up the Awash valley from the southeast. That Ethiopia survived the sixteenth century as a Christian state was more to do with good fortune than the 'loyalty' of the newly conquered southern provinces.

The main themes of the region south of the Ethiopian highlands are threefold. First, there is the greater political complexity that grew from population increase, which, in turn, was partly related to improved hunting, agricultural and pastoral practices. Sometimes, however, it was linked to immigration, such as that of Nilotic pastoralists from the region of modern South Sudan. From this societal complexity, one can observe the origins of chieftaincy and, in some cases, state formation.

Second, there is the increasing role of long-distance trade, especially with the east African coast, which provided opportunity

for increased social stratification that, in turn, promoted state formation. Whatever their temporal wealth and social advantages, however, rulers of these emerging states invariably justified their claim to leadership through some kind of religious authority, be it the guardianship of a religious shrine or spiritual links to prominent or 'founding' ancestors.

Finally, through linking oral tradition with archaeological and linguistic evidence, one can begin to see traces of the origins of modern cultural identities.

In the grasslands south of the Zambezi, the possession of cattle assumed increasing importance, its accumulation often being closely linked to claims to chieftaincy. But here, too, it was long-distance trade with the east African coast that could turn a local chieftaincy into a powerful, socially stratified state, as happened with the Mapungubwe trading state of the Limpopo valley and the better known Shona state that was centred on Great Zimbabwe. The eventual decline of each of these was probably related to environmental degradation, as observed elsewhere in this history of states that passed critical levels of static population.

The Swahili trading communities along the east African coast were primarily African developments, although closely linked with small numbers of Arab Muslim immigrants and their trading networks across the western Indian Ocean. The prosperity of Swahili coastal ports and offshore island settlements was built on the ability of emerging African states of the interior to provide the high-value goods, especially ivory and gold, that the Asian markets desired. This harmonious trading network was dealt a harsh blow when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean from the south at the end of the fifteenth century.

CHAPTER 8

Eastern Africa to the sixteenth century

The Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, 850–1550

We saw in [Chapter 3](#) that by 800 CE the capital of Ethiopia had moved further south from Aksum to the central highlands of the interior. External trade had declined with the rise of Muslim Baghdad and the subsequent diversion of Indian Ocean trade away from the Red Sea. By the early ninth century, Ethiopia had become an isolated outpost of Christianity, a largely agricultural economy, controlled by a landed aristocracy. Further expansion southwards had, for the time being, been halted by fierce resistance from the indigenous Agew communities of the Shoan plateau.

From about 1000 CE, the fortunes of the Ethiopian kingdom began to recover. The period saw a revival of Red Sea trade, prompted by the growth of an independent Fatimid-ruled Egypt. Ethiopia exported a little gold to Egypt and probably some ivory. And the region remained one of the Muslim world's most important sources of the precious resins frankincense and myrrh. But one of the most profitable of Ethiopia's exports appears to have been captives, particularly women, for sale as concubines and household servants to the Muslims of Yemen, southwestern Arabia. These captives were probably taken in warfare with highland communities south of Lake Tana. The principal trading link of the time was north of the old Aksumite port of Adulis to the Muslim-controlled offshore islands of Dahlak.

Ethiopia under the Zagwe dynasty, 1150–1270

The main period of Ethiopian revival followed the emergence of the Zagwe dynasty from among a group of Agew military officers who had been enlisted into the Aksumite elite. 'Zagwe' is thought to derive from *Ze Agew* ('of Agew'). In about 1150, Mara Tekle Haimanot, one of their number, seized the throne from the descendants of the Aksumite line of kings, claiming legitimacy by marrying into the remnants of the old Aksumite royal family. The Christian Church was still dominant in the culture of Aksum/Ethiopia and in order to aid their acceptance by Church leaders, the Zagwe kings turned to the Old Testament and invented myths of their descent from Moses. The Zagwe kings pursued a more aggressive expansion of the Christian Ethiopian state. They commanded a large army and were able to expand Christian control and settlement south of Lake Tana to Gojjam and on to the Shoan plateau.

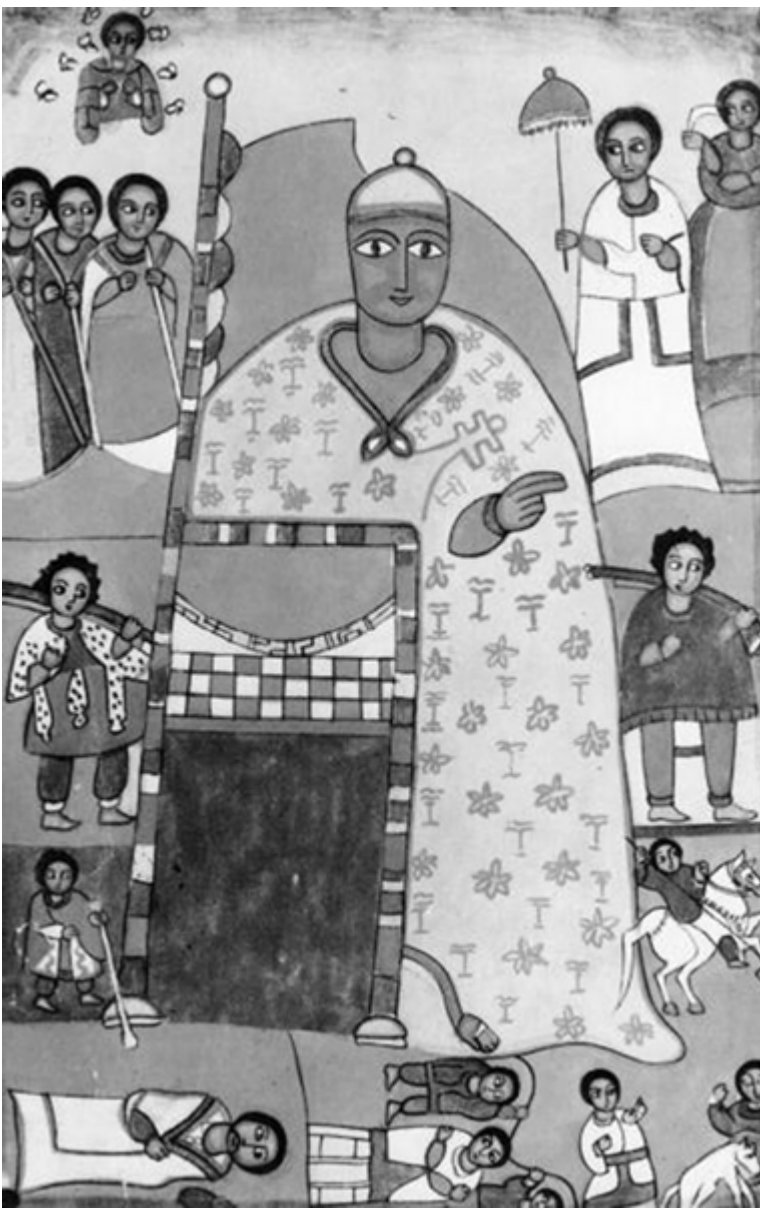
As the state expanded, traditional rulers of conquered regions were replaced by Christian military leaders or by members of the royal family or their trusted friends. These district governors were granted

large personal estates and the freedom to tax the local people. They were expected to organise the military protection of their districts, ensure the safety of traders, provide central government with taxation, and support the king in time of war. New conquests were backed up by the presence of Christian missionaries. They set up monasteries on land granted by the king. These became important centres of learning and Ethiopian Christian culture, although conversion to Christianity was slow to take hold.

Ethiopian Christianity

The Zagwe rulers reopened links between the Ethiopian Church and the Holy Land of Palestine. Even in its centuries of greatest isolation, the Ethiopian Church had maintained contact with the remnants of the Egyptian Coptic Church. Ethiopia was regarded as part of the ancient archdiocese of Alexandria. Throughout the period of Coptic decline with the rise of Islam, the Ethiopian Church continued to have an Egyptian appointed as its most senior bishop. Despite this connection, the Ethiopian Church developed its own individual characteristics. Ethiopians saw themselves as an outpost of Christianity – a sort of chosen people of God – surrounded by pagans and Muslims. In their rituals and beliefs, they developed close connections with the Old Testament. They believed themselves to be the true descendants of ancient Israel. At the same time, the monastic tradition inherited from sixth-century Monophysite missionaries remained very strong.

Figure 8.1 Portrait of King Lalibela, from an illuminated manuscript. It was during the reign of Lalibela that the famous ‘rock churches’ of Ethiopia (see Figure 8.2) were excavated and carved.



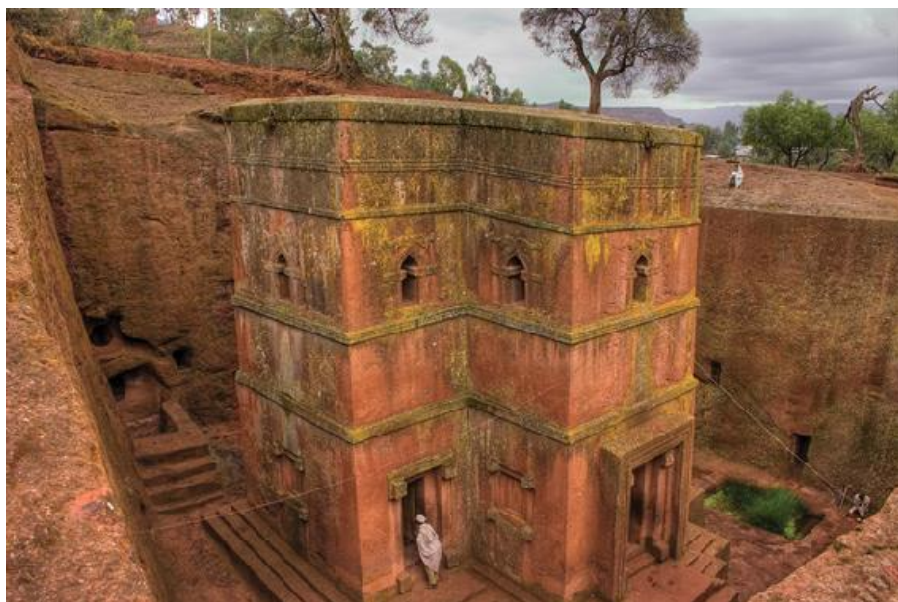
Source: Hulton Archive/Stringer/Getty Images.

The outward-looking policy of the Zagwe dynasty further developed this sense of connection between the Ethiopian Church and the Jerusalem of the Old Testament. By the early thirteenth century, trading relations between Egypt and Ethiopia had improved enough for Ethiopian Christians to travel freely through Muslim Egypt. Thus encouraged, Ethiopians began to make regular pilgrimages down the Nile and eastwards to the holy city of Jerusalem.

During the reign of Lalibela (see [Figure 8.1](#)), who ruled from about

1185 to 1225, the monks in the region of the capital Roha (now known as Lalibela) began building a most remarkable series of churches (see [Figure 8.2](#)). These were hewn out of solid rock and remain, unique to this day, a testament to the strength and fervour of the Ethiopian Christian Church. A total of eleven churches have been found carved out of the mountains in the region of the capital, which was thereafter renamed Lalibela, after the monarch. A number of the churches were named after famous sites in Jerusalem such as Golgotha, the tomb of Christ. This led the late Dr Sergew Hable Sellassie to suggest that the Lalibela churches were, in fact, an attempt to recreate Jerusalem itself in the mountains of Ethiopia.¹ They certainly strengthened the usurper Zagwe dynasty's legitimacy in the eyes of the Ethiopian Christian Church. A large number of smaller and older churches have been found cut into the mountains and caves of the northern Aksumite region of Tigray. These offer proof that the Lalibela churches were a continuation of the artistic and architectural traditions of ancient Aksum.

Figure 8.2 The church of St George, one of the eleven churches at Lalibela, Ethiopia hewn from the living rock. It is believed that these churches were used to recreate the holy sites of Jerusalem in the highlands of Ethiopia. A UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Source: Lingbeek/iStock.

Ethiopia under the Solomonid dynasty, 1270–1550

In 1270, the last Zagwe ruler was ousted by a new line of kings known as the Solomonid dynasty. Much as their predecessors had done, the Solomonid kings justified their right to power by claiming legitimacy through a biblical lineage; in their case, descent through the rulers of ancient Aksum from the mythical union of biblical King Solomon and the queen of Sheba (Saba). This was spelled out in the *Kebrä Negast* ('Glory of the Kings'), a collection of myths and oral traditions compiled by Tigrayan scribes in the fourteenth century. The Solomonid dynasty witnessed the production of a great deal of literature, ranging from religious tracts and theological disputes to royal chronicles. The latter are an invaluable resource for students of Ethiopian history.

The Solomonid rulers came from the central highland region of Amhara. Here, early pre-Christian Ge'ez-speaking settlers had mingled with local Cushitic-speaking peoples to produce the Amharic language, the dominant language of modern Ethiopia.

The rise of the Solomonids brought an end to the architectural traditions inherited from ancient Aksum. Instead, there was a movement towards a plainer style of architecture, more typical of much of tropical Africa. The building of stone, rectangular churches and palaces ceased. Further new monasteries were built in the less permanent, less grandiose style of domestic housing, namely, a circular design made of mud brick, pole and thatch.

The change in court and religious architecture was characteristic of a sense of impermanence within the court itself. It appears that, as has so often happened in other societies, population pressure on the environment became too great to be sustained around a large permanent settlement. The mountainous terrain, which tended to confine populations within the confines of the valleys ([Figure 8.3](#)), also made it difficult for the royal capital to receive sufficient food supplies from more distant parts of the kingdom. The king and his officials solved these supply problems by living in a series of temporary tented camps, which were moved, sometimes two or three times a year, from one district to another. A European visitor to the Solomonid court in the sixteenth century observed that the presence of this temporary royal capital so depleted a region of its fuel and food supplies that the site could not be resettled for anything up to ten years. The royal capital was clearly a consumer rather than a producer of natural wealth. With this level of environmental exploitation, even on a small local scale, visions of late twentieth-century Ethiopia spring to mind. But there was a further advantage to the king, in this moving of his capital. It enabled him to keep in touch with otherwise isolated

regions and so reinforce their loyalty and ensure payment of taxation.

Following a period of civil war in the 1290s, future problems of dynastic rivalry were resolved by an unusual practice. As soon as a new king had succeeded to the throne, all possible royal rivals were imprisoned in the mountain fortress of Gishen. This novel device was so successful that Gishen remained a royal prison for the best part of two-and-a-half centuries, until the Muslim conquests of the sixteenth century.

The Solomonid dynasty looked to the south for the further expansion of the Ethiopian kingdom, and in doing so they created an empire. This they achieved during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through a mixture of military conquest and the building of Christian monasteries as centres of conversion. In fact, they achieved little real success in converting the bulk of the population in the more southerly parts of the kingdom. But at the same time, the Solomonids hoped to exploit the southern trading networks to the east of the Shoan plateau. This, as we shall see, brought them into conflict with the Muslim sultanates of the Awash valley. The conflict that followed was to dominate the life of Christian Ethiopia for the next two centuries, and almost destroyed it in the 1530s.

Figure 8.3 A valley in the Ethiopian mountains. In isolated valleys such as these, local aristocratic landlords or district governors were often able to behave as though completely independent of central Ethiopian control.



Source: *HomoCosmos*/iStock.

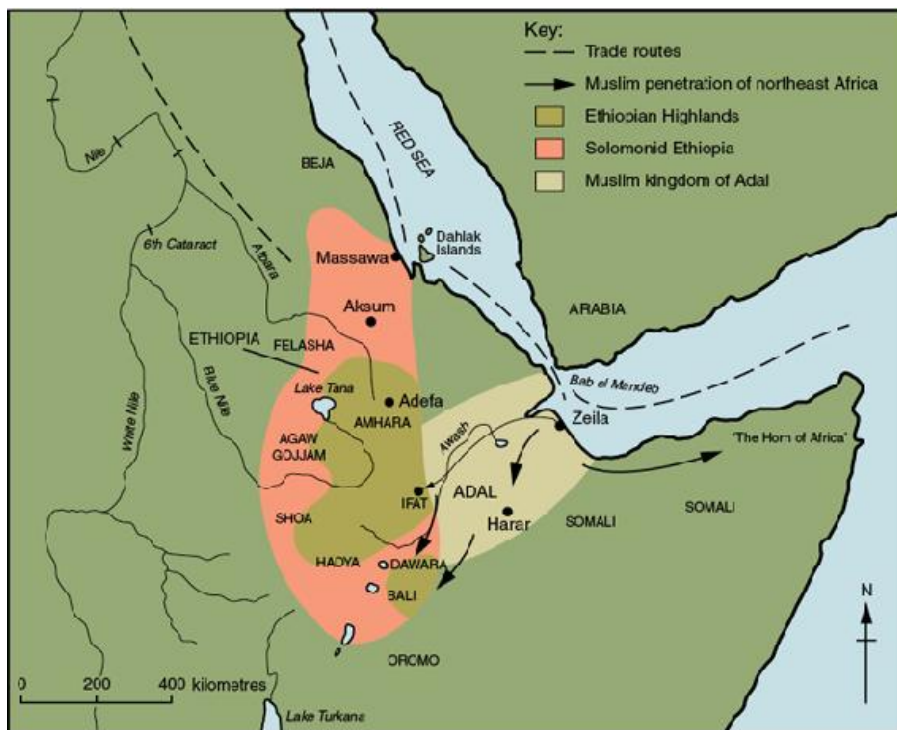
Muslim penetration of Ethiopia and Somalia, 850–1550

We have already seen that the eighth-century rise of Baghdad as the Asiatic capital of the Muslim world shifted Indian Ocean trade away from the Red Sea and towards the Persian Gulf. This brought the Somali coast of eastern Africa (sometimes referred to as the ‘Horn’ of Africa) into closer contact with Muslim Indian Ocean trading networks. Arabs no longer looked to the Dahlak islands and other Red Sea ports as their main source of African trading products. By 900 at the latest, Zeila, on the northern Somali coast just south of modern Djibouti, had become an important alternative Muslim trading settlement (see [Map 8.1](#)).

Muslim states of the interior

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Muslim merchants, probably mainly of Arab origin, began penetrating the Awash valley towards the highlands of Ethiopia. They set up small trading settlements from which they controlled the external trade of the interior. Initially, they exercised little direct control over the surrounding non-Muslim, Cushitic-speaking communities. Gradually, however, they came to dominate the economic life of the region.

Initially competing against each other for the ivory and slave trade of the interior, Muslim merchants soon learnt the advantages of cooperation and unity. In the early twelfth century a merchant family from Mecca brought together a number of interior Muslim settlements to form the ‘Sultanate of Shoa’. Other similar Muslim states followed and by 1300 the dominant position of the Sultanate of Shoa had been taken by the ‘Sultanate of Ifat’. During the early 1300s, Muslim merchants penetrated the highlands south of the Blue Nile. Driven by their search for new sources of slaves, they set up a number of small trading and raiding states. This brought them into conflict with Christian Ethiopia, then at the height of its power under the Zagwe dynasty.

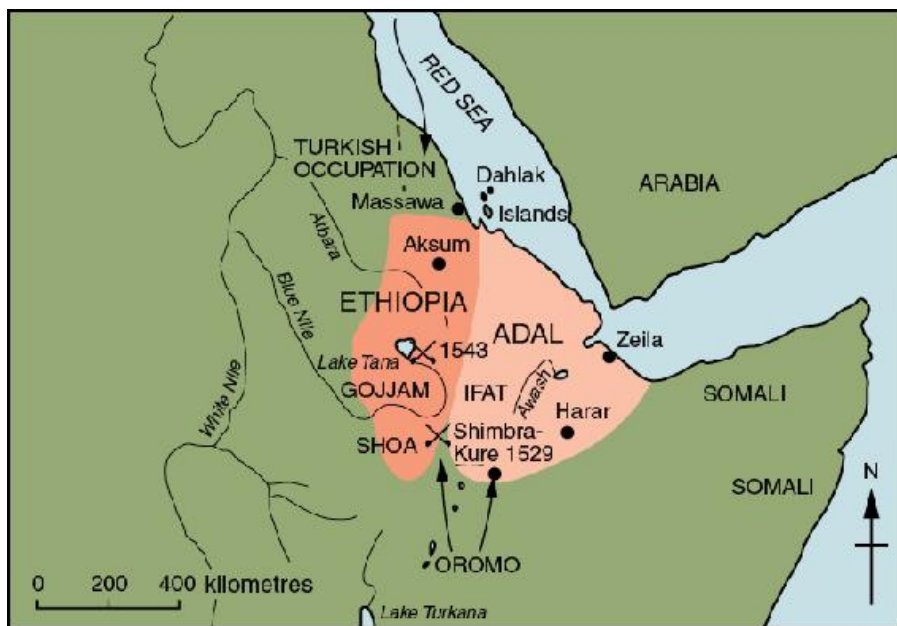


Ethiopia was at a distinct advantage when it came to military conflict. The Zagwe kings ruled over a relatively united highland kingdom and could command a large and effective standing army. The Muslim sultans, on the other hand, were generally disunited and could not muster an efficient fighting force. Their armies, such as they were, were more accustomed to raiding for captives than fighting in defence of territory. Thus, between 1320 and 1340, Ifat and the other Muslim states of the highland plateau were defeated and brought within the expanding empire of Christian Ethiopia.

The Sultanate of Adal and the conflict with Ethiopia

The deposed rulers of Ifat withdrew eastwards to the plateau of Harar where they founded the ‘Sultanate of Adal’. Here, from a strategic position between the highlands of Ethiopia and the coastal port of Zeila, the Walaswa dynasty set about rebuilding Muslim power. They united the Muslims of the interior and began converting to Islam the pastoral Somali to their east and southeast. Somali pastoral nomads proved a useful source of manpower in the building of a more powerful Muslim army. In this way, the Somali were gradually drawn into the heightening conflict between Muslim Adal and Christian Ethiopia.

Most of the battles between the two sides were little more than elaborate raids, from which each brought home large booties of cattle and captives. In the early decades of the fifteenth century, the Ethiopians briefly occupied the Harar plateau, but they soon lost momentum and by 1450, Adal had recovered. A near-perpetual state of war persisted through most of the fifteenth century, which must have significantly disrupted peaceful trade and economic development in the region.



In 1526, a Muslim general named Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (also known as Gran, 'the left-handed') became effective leader of Adal. As a military man, he saw Christian Ethiopia as a constant threat to Muslim security in the region. In his view, the only way to end the disruptive pattern of raid and counter-raid was by the final conquest and destruction of the Christian kingdom. To achieve this, Ahmad summoned up Muslim unity and fervour in the name of a jihad, a holy war.

In the past, the armies of the Muslim sultanates had been no match for the large, experienced and well-organised army of Ethiopia. But, in confronting the Christian kingdom in the name of a jihad, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim had two distinct advantages over his predecessors. First, the Ethiopian unity, which had earlier been that country's great strength,

was showing signs of breaking up. This was especially so in the country's southern districts. Christianity had never taken deep hold here, with the bulk of the local farming population being sorely exploited by the Christian aristocracy. The latter often failed to respond to the demands of central government. Governorships, which had earlier been appointed, had become hereditary. And district governors treated the great estates that went with their office like their own private kingdoms. This tendency was encouraged by the mountainous terrain and steep-sided valleys, which made communication between districts very difficult. Nevertheless, when confronted with invasion by Muslim Adal, King Lebna Dengel (or Dawit II) was still able to summon up an enormous Christian army. This brings us to Ahmad ibn Ibrahim's second new advantage. The Muslim army was now supplied with up-to-date firearms traded from the Ottoman Turks who had recently extended their empire into Egypt.

Ahmad's army invaded the Shoan plateau and defeated a much larger Christian army at the Battle of Shimbira Kure in 1529. Both sides lost heavily in the battle, Adal's losses being estimated at 5,000 men, and Ethiopia's far higher. For many years, much of southern Ethiopia had merely been held together by the overawing presence of the Ethiopian army. Now, with the defeat of that army, Ethiopian unity fell apart. Over the next six years, Ahmad's army overran southern Ethiopia, burning and looting churches, killing Christian district governors and replacing them with Muslims. Lebna Dengel evaded capture but was unable to organise effective Christian resistance. In desperation, he appealed to Christian Europe for assistance against the 'common enemy' of Islam.

The Ethiopian kings had been in touch with the Portuguese for a number of years and Portuguese ambassadors had resided at Lebna Dengel's court since at least 1520. The Portuguese responded by landing a small but well-equipped force in the north of the country. (Portuguese motives at this time will be considered in [Chapter 14](#).) The combined Portuguese and Ethiopian force managed to save the Christian kingdom, inflicting a sharp defeat on the Muslim army in 1543. Ahmad himself was killed in the battle and with this loss his 'empire' collapsed. Not too much need be read into the contribution of the Portuguese to this important Ethiopian victory. The eventual defeat of Ahmad in Ethiopia was predictable, once his army became badly overstretched and he neglected to consolidate his conquests. Further weakening Ahmad's position, many of the Somali nomads, who formed the bulk of the Muslim army, had already returned home with their booty.

So far as the historian is concerned, the major significance of the Portuguese connection at this time was that it resulted in some vivid written descriptions of sixteenth-century Ethiopia. Father Francisco Alvares, for instance, chaplain to the first Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia, commented on the effects of the oppressive rule of the king and his nobility:

There would be much fruit and much more cultivation in the country, if the great men did not ill-treat the people, for they take whatever they have ... nobody from the common people may kill a cow (even though it is his own) without leave from the lord of the country.

The people speak the truth little, even when they make oath, unless they swear by the head of the King ... and if they are ordered to do something that is to their disadvantage they do it from fear of excommunication.²

Following the death of Ahmad, the Ethiopians under Galadewos (1540–59) recovered much of the Amharic and Shoaan plateau over the next ten years. But two decades of destructive warfare had weakened the southern defences of both Ethiopia and Adal. This allowed the Oromo pastoralists of the dry savannah grasslands northeast of Lake Turkana to encroach into the southern highlands towards the upper Awash valley. Further Oromo expansion and their impact on the subsequent history of the region will be examined in [Chapter 13](#).

Pastoralists and farmers of the east African interior

The evidence

We have seen that areas like Ethiopia and parts of northern and western Africa do have a certain amount of documentary evidence to back up archaeology and other sources of historical information. Unfortunately, the same is not true of the east African interior, that is, the inland regions of modern Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. Literate peoples were active on the coast, as we shall see in [Chapter 9](#), but they did not penetrate far inland. The peoples of the interior did not evolve their own system of writing and we do not have the written observations of outsiders until the nineteenth century. This leaves linguistics and archaeology as the principal sources of evidence for the early history of the east African interior.

The character and limitations of language study and archaeology as sources of historical evidence were described in [Chapter 4](#).

Fortunately, from about the fifteenth century, the historian is able to draw on the oral traditions of the modern peoples of the region. These, too, have their limitations, however, especially in the early period. They focus mainly on the succession of rulers and tell us little if anything about how people lived. In addition, it is known that facts (chiefly genealogies) have sometimes been distorted in order to justify the claims to leadership of a particular clan or chief. Nevertheless, much can be learnt by comparing the traditional history of one particular group with that of other neighbouring, and perhaps competing, peoples. The careful use of oral traditions can add a great deal to the otherwise impersonal and general observations arising from archaeology and the comparative study of languages.

Later Iron Age peoples of the east African interior, c.1500



East Africans in the Early Iron Age period

We saw in [Chapter 3](#) that there is some evidence that the techniques of iron smelting might have been developed independently in east Africa before the Common Era. But at the same time, it is clear that ironworking technology was not actively spread through the east African interior until the early centuries CE. Then it was brought by Bantu-speaking farmers coming into the region from the west and southwest. These Early Iron Age farmers chose their sites carefully and settled the moist lakeside areas and fertile river valleys most suited to their crop cultivation. At this stage, they had little reliance on cattle and so made little use of the drier upland regions more suited to

grazing cattle and growing light cereal crops. Thus, the dry open pastures of the central Rift Valley of Kenya and northern Tanzania remained largely undisturbed by early ironworking farmers. Here, stone-using peoples continued their age-old practices of hunting and herding cattle until at least 1000 CE. It is thought that these were Cushitic-speaking peoples, probably descendants of the stone-using pastoralists described in [Chapter 2](#).

We also saw in [Chapter 2](#) that the presence of tsetse fly in thickly wooded areas was often a barrier to the spread of cattle-keeping peoples. But where woodland was cut down and wild game driven away, the tsetse fly dispersed too. Thus, the clearing of land for cultivation tended to make more grassland available for future grazing. The longer that mixed farming communities, like the Early Iron Age Bantu speakers, remained in a region, the greater the chances that keeping cattle could become more important in their economy. This is what had happened in the east African interior by about 1000 CE.

Origins of the Later Iron Age

Archaeologists and historians of eastern Africa generally refer to this period after about 1000 CE as the 'Later Iron Age'. This is because between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, a number of distinct changes occurred among the Iron Age peoples of the east African interior. This is revealed in the archaeological evidence, which shows, on the one hand, a new emphasis on keeping cattle, and on the other, the introduction of a completely new style of pottery. The main evidence for the earlier period occurs in the 'inter-lake' region of central and southern Uganda. Here, from about 1000 CE, the drier upland pastures became more intensively occupied by people keeping cattle and cultivating cereals.

The explanation most widely proposed in the 1950s and 60s was that these changes were brought about by the immigration of new populations into the region. In recent decades, however, linguistic research has pointed to the likelihood that these changes evolved locally, and represented new organisations of society rather than new populations. Furthermore, archaeological research has shown that many centuries of numerous Early Iron Age smelting and cultivating settlements had caused serious deforestation in the region to the west of the Victoria Nyanza (Lake Victoria). As forest was cleared, grassland suitable for herding cattle became more widespread. This paved the way for the emergence of small, but powerful chiefdoms that based their political power on the authority of spirit mediums and

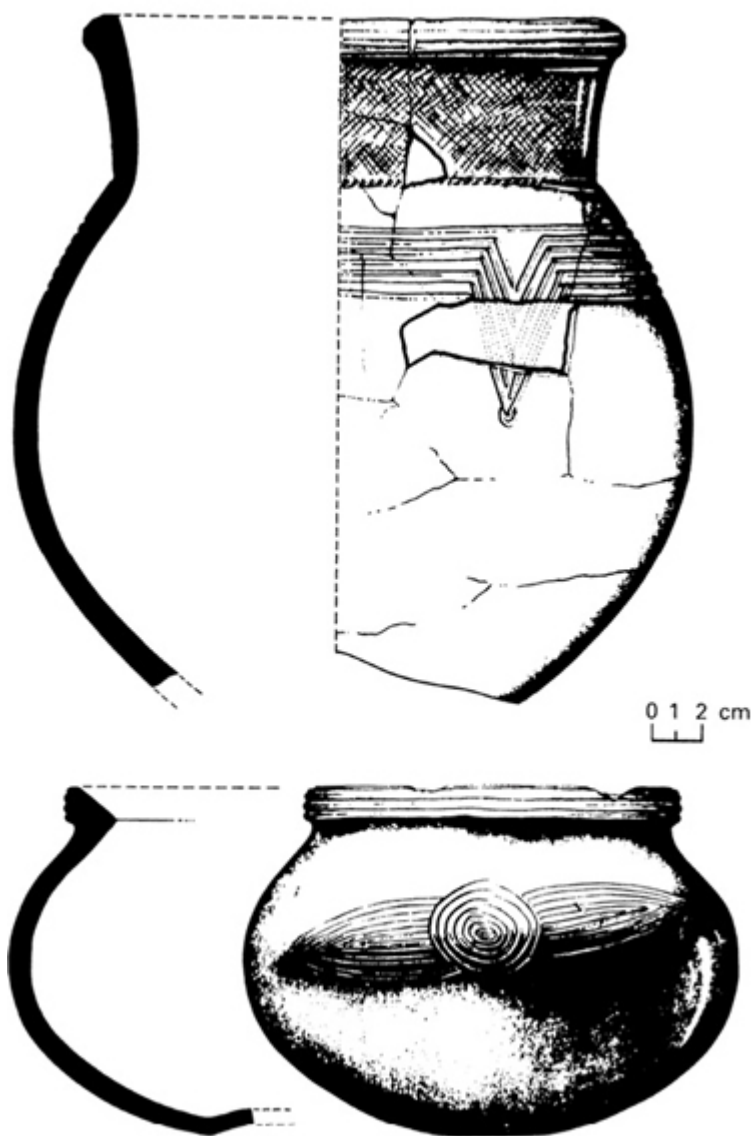
their economic power on the control of cattle ownership.

Another factor that may have favoured pastoral chieftaincy was climate change. It is known that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a period when the climate of much of tropical Africa became cooler and drier. Rainfall was less predictable and drought more frequent. Farming communities undoubtedly suffered. The pastoralists, on the other hand, were not so badly affected. This would have given them an economic and political advantage and enabled some pastoralist leaders to assume positions of chieftaincy over farming communities who, in effect, became their clients.

The carefully made and skilfully decorated Urewe ware of the Early Iron Age was replaced throughout the region by a coarser, simpler style of pottery. This is known as 'rouletted' ware because its decoration was 'rolled' onto the outside of the rim with knotted ropes of grass while the clay was still wet. The adoption of new styles of pottery by pre-existing populations suggests important local changes in the organisation of domestic life. The more finely constructed Urewe ware was probably made by a small number of skilled craftsmen, specialists in the community who were rewarded with a relatively high social status for their craft. The adoption of coarser 'rouletted' ware suggests that Later Iron Age pottery in this part of Africa was probably made by a wider range of less specialised potters. In fact, making pottery had probably become a routine domestic task performed by the women while the men were engaged in the higher status task of looking after cattle.

As the Later Iron Age spread, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, a large number of small chiefdoms emerged throughout the inter-lake region. Some placed greater emphasis on pastoralism, others on cultivation, depending on what was best suited to local conditions. There was considerable local trade between cultivator and pastoralist. Cultivators, being the ironworkers, were able to trade their iron tools and weapons for the cattle and hides of the pastoralists. By about 1450, a number of these chiefdoms had merged to form the state of Kitara in the southwest region of Uganda. Oral tradition claimed that the Bachwezi were the founding dynasty of the Kitara state and that they ruled for two generations from their capital at Bigo near the Katonga River. Most historians, however, generally accept that the Bachwezi were mythical ancestry figures promoted by the Jo-Bito clan of Lwo-speaking immigrants who laid claim to the Kitara state in about 1500 CE. It is thought that the Bachwezi may have had some religious significance in the region and that the Jo-Bito immigrants adopted them to give their rule local legitimacy.

Figure 8.4 Iron Age pottery of eastern Africa. (a) Finely crafted Early Iron Age pots from Rwanda; (b) More simply constructed Later Iron Age rim shards with twisted cord decoration, also from Rwanda.



Immigration by Nilotic-speaking peoples

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, a number of Later Iron Age pastoralists from southern Sudan and southwestern Ethiopia pushed down into the favourable grassland regions of the east African

interior. Linguistic evidence shows them to have been speakers of the Nilo-Saharan group of languages (see Map 4.1). For this reason, they are generally referred to as the 'Nilotes'. Why exactly they should move at this time is not known for sure. But a prolonged period of severe drought, from the late sixteenth through to the mid-seventeenth centuries, was a likely factor in prompting these Nilotic pastoralists to push ever further southwards in search of better watered pastures. Initial migrations were not in large numbers and were probably in the form of small-scale seasonal movements.

Although primarily pastoralists, most of the newcomers also practised cereal cultivation and so they moved mainly into the drier upland regions. In many cases, they mingled and intermarried with their Bantu-speaking predecessors and with them developed new dialects. At the same time, they brought with them a number of practices characteristic of the peoples of southern Sudan. These included initiation ceremonies involving circumcision and the pastoralist practices of bleeding cattle and making greater use of cow's milk as a form of food.

There were three main groups of Nilotic-speaking immigrants into east Africa: the western or River-Lake Nilotes, the southern or Highland Nilotes and the eastern or Plains Nilotes.

Figure 8.5 Pastoralists of modern Sudan. A shepherd leading his cattle to market near Khartoum.



The western Nilotes

The main western Nilotes were the Lwo-speaking peoples. They originated in the South Sudan region of the Sudd, which is where the Bahr el Ghazal meets the White Nile to form a seasonal floodplain. Migration of the Lwo-speaking Nilotes probably began with their seasonal movements to and from the pastures of the Sudd. By 1450, a number of Lwo-speaking clans had gathered at Pubungo near the northern border of modern Uganda. This appears to have been a hunting and raiding base for at least a generation. From there, they dispersed in small clan groups through the inter-lake region and northeast of the Victoria Nyanza. One of these, the Jo-Bito clan, took control of the Kitara state in the western region of modern Uganda, and founded the Bito dynasty of the kingdom of Bunyoro. Similar Lwo origins are traced in the oral traditions of other Ugandan states, in particular Buganda. The history of Buganda belongs to a later period and will be discussed in [Chapter 14](#). It is probably also to these western Nilote immigrants that the origins of specialist pastoralist groups such as the Hima of Nkore and the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi can be traced (see [Chapter 14](#)).

Even though Lwo-speaking immigrants often formed a ruling clan, they blended with the local Bantu-speaking population and adopted their language. Nevertheless, in a few cases, they retained their own distinctive traditions and language, as with, for instance, the Luo to the northeast of the Victoria Nyanza.

The southern Nilotes

The southern Nilotes (sometimes referred to as Paraniotes) came from slightly further east in the southern Sudan. Their origins can be traced to the dry grassland zone to the northwest of Lake Turkana. Their initial southward movement into east Africa had occurred between about 200 BCE and 1000 CE. This was much earlier than that of the western and eastern Nilotes. In fact, it coincided more in time with the spread of Early Iron Age Bantu speakers into the region. These early southern Nilotes had moved into the highlands to the east of the Victoria Nyanza. They came as ironworking cereal farmers and herdsmen and absorbed the earlier stone-using southern Cushites of the region. From this combination, there emerged the early Kalenjin peoples of the western Kenyan highlands. The Dadog of central Tanzania were similarly the result of a further extension of southern Nilotes and their absorption of southern Cushites.

The fertile valleys and upland pastures of the western Kenyan highlands were particularly suited to the combination of cereal

farming and cattle herding of the early Kalenjin. As a result, the western highlands became a centre for further expansion in the period after 1000 CE. As they expanded their settlements, they came into contact with a number of other Later Iron Age groups. From this further contact and intermingling, there developed a number of distinct groups, such as the Elgeyo, the Pokot and the Nandi, whose earlier origins can be traced to the southern Nilotes.

The eastern Nilotes

The eastern Nilotes (also sometimes referred to as Paraniotes) came from the same grassland zone northwest of Lake Turkana. The eastern Nilotes were much more of a positive intrusion than the earlier Nilotic groups, retaining their distinctive language and cultural traditions. From the eastern Nilotes stem the Ateker (Karamojong) of northeastern Uganda and the Maasai of the central Kenyan and northern Tanzanian plains. But their intrusion into the east African interior belongs to a later period and as such will be considered further in [Chapter 14](#).

- 1 Sergew, H.S. (1972) *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (United Printers: Addis Ababa).
- 2 Beckingham, C.F. and Huntingford, G.W.B. (eds) (1961) *The Prester John of the Indies*, vol. 2 (Hakluyt Society: Cambridge), p. 515.



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CHAPTER 9

Later Iron Age states and societies of central and southern Africa to the sixteenth century

The cultural and economic changes that were observed in eastern Africa after about 1000 CE ([Chapter 8](#)) also occurred in central and southern Africa around the same time. And as with eastern Africa, the transition was associated with a change in the style of pottery recovered from Iron Age settlement sites. It was now made of finer clay, decorated more elaborately and fired to a harder finish. Detailed study of this pottery and other archaeological artefacts has revealed a certain level of continuity between Early and Later periods. It appears that, in some areas, the development of Later Iron Age practices was gradual and evolved locally. In others, the changes were fairly swift, suggesting the arrival of ideas or small numbers of influential people from outside that particular locality. The timing of the transition was equally variable, occurring sometime between the ninth and fourteenth centuries.

In the later Iron Age, as people learned to make the most of their local environment, agricultural and fishing techniques were improved and mining and manufacturing skills were further developed. In some areas, particularly in southern Africa, there was increasing emphasis on cattle keeping, as people brought the drier grasslands into greater use. Certain communities specialised in mining, metal manufacture, food production or hunting. All this regional specialisation helped promote interregional trade. The remnants of the stone-using hunter-gatherers were squeezed out or absorbed as populations expanded and more land was brought into regular use.

State formation north of the Zambezi

Religion and kingship in central Africa

With the development of Later Iron Age specialisations and population growth, people organised themselves in larger political units and there was a corresponding rise in the power and importance of territorial chiefs.

The chiefs and kings that rose to power in the savannah woodlands south of the Congo forest could usually trace the root of their authority to religious practices. They may initially have gained power through the control of trade, or by possessing superior metalworking, hunting knowledge or other skills. But whatever their material source of secular power, they typically justified their right to rule through their role as mediators in traditional religion or their ancestral links with the spirit world. Thus, the ancient rulers of Kongo were guardians of the ‘spirits of the land’ (for similar beliefs in west Africa, see Chapter 7). The original rulers of the Mbundu of modern Angola and the early Chewa of modern Malawi were guardians of religious ‘rain-making’ shrines. The people paid them tribute as religious leaders. They in turn ensured the success of harvest, hunt or rain. In a more secular role, they protected the people from outside attack or maintained the safety of trade routes. In times of drought and famine, they redistributed stores of food to the needy, raided neighbours or organised a move to a more fruitful and fertile site.

Figure 9.1 Potters of the Zambezi valley in the early twentieth century, decorating pots in the style of the Later Iron Age.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Origins and early growth of the Luba kingdom

One of the more important areas for the early growth of Later Iron Age chieftaincy was in the upper Lualaba valley, around Lake Kisale in the southeast of the Congo Basin (see [Map 9.1](#)). The Lake Kisale region had been continuously occupied by ironworking farmers since at least the fourth century CE. It was particularly well situated for the production of food surpluses. The savannah woodland on the southern edge of the Congo forest was a fertile region for the cultivation of cereal crops, with sufficient rainfall to ensure a regular surplus. In addition, the woodlands were good for hunting and the river and lakes for fishing.

The peoples of the Lake Kisale region made maximum use of the available resources. Over the centuries, they developed the use of nets,

harpoons and dugout canoes and cleared canals through reed-covered swamps. They developed the technique of drying fish. This not only provided them with an important source of protein, but also meant that their surplus catch could now be traded to other peoples. They bought iron and salt from the north, and copper from the south where it was mined extensively in the region of the modern Zambian/Congo Copperbelt. They became expert craftsmen, especially in metal manufacture. They drew heated copper into fine wire for rings, bracelets and necklaces or cast it into cross-shaped ingots for trading or storing wealth (see [Figure 9.3](#)).

Figure 9.2 A Later Iron Age burial, excavated in the Lake Kisale region. Judging by the number of pots, this was a prominent individual. The pots may originally have been filled with various offerings, probably foodstuffs.



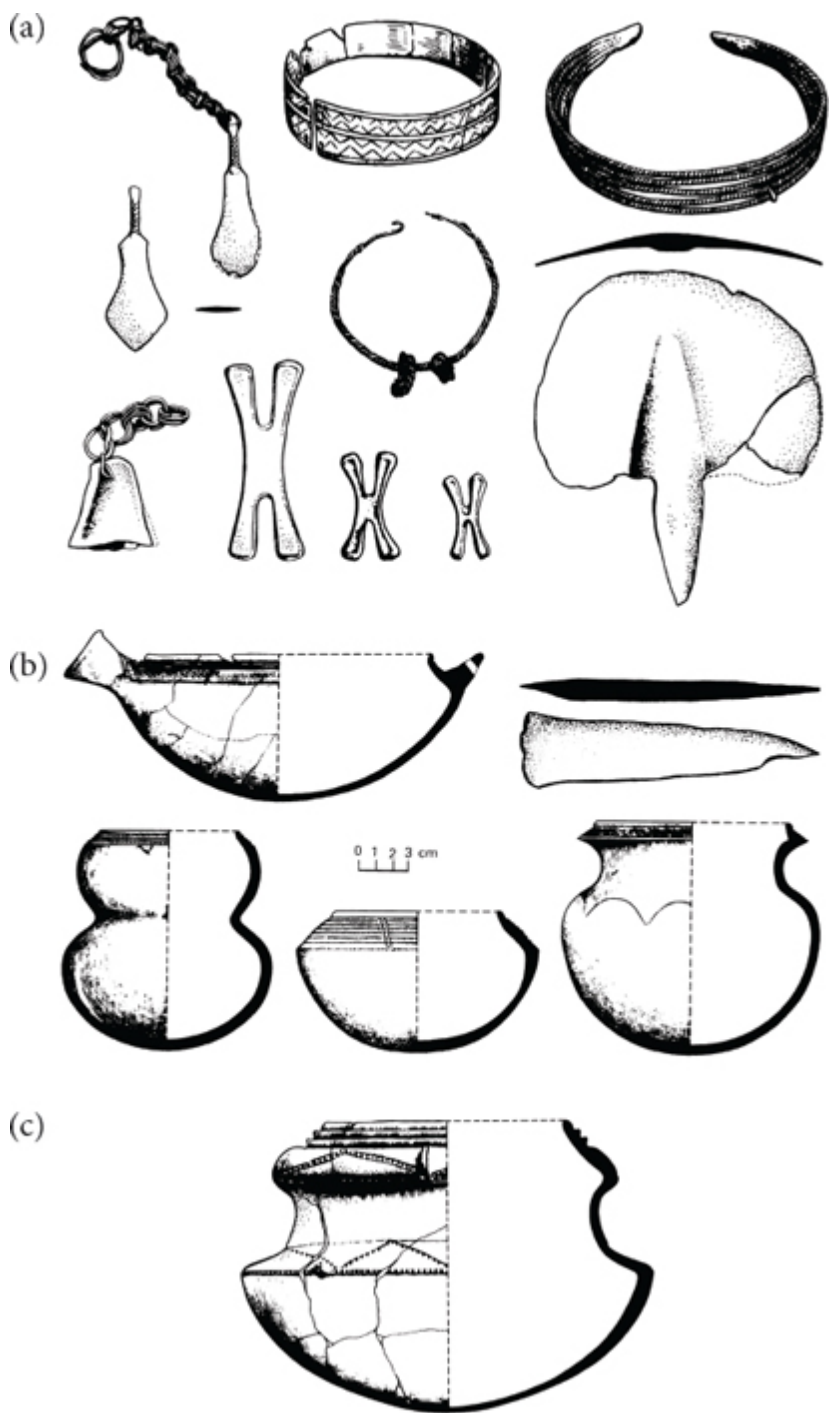
Source: Reproduced by permission of Pierre de Maret and RMCA Tervuren.

By 1300 at the latest, the peoples of the Lake Kisale region were organised into a number of prosperous farming and trading chiefdoms: the ancestors of the modern Luba. Their prime farming and fishing grounds were, however, strictly limited. It was possibly competition for these increasingly limited resources that led some village chiefdoms to group together into larger, more centralised states. During the fourteenth century, the Luba east of the Lualaba River were organised into a single centralised kingdom under a dynasty known as Nkongolo. Each ruler of the dynasty assumed the title

‘Nkongolo’. According to Luba oral tradition, the original Nkongolo came from the Songye peoples of the north. In the early fifteenth century, the Nkongolo were ousted by a new dynasty. According to Luba mythology, the founding hero of this dynasty was a great huntsman called Ilunga Kalala. His father had come to Lubaland from the Kunda in the north and had married the sister of the ruling Nkongolo. Ilunga Kalala is portrayed in oral tradition as a heroic huntsman, possessing magical powers. He was probably the leader of a band of professional hunters who gained status and acceptance among the Luba by the introduction of new hunting techniques. These may have included the use of the bow and iron-tipped arrow not previously found in the region.

The Ilunga dynasty strengthened the centralised power of government and expanded the kingdom west of Lake Kisale. The central court of the kingdom was dominated by the royal dynasty. The king appointed provincial governors, often from the royal family, to collect tribute from local chiefs and headmen. The Luba kings only had a very small standing army but this was backed up by the powerful mystical and religious authority of the king. Within the court itself, there was great family rivalry for power. Around the 1450s, disappointed rivals from within the royal clan moved off to found their own kingdom among the Lunda to their west, astride the tributaries of the upper Kasai River.

Figure 9.3 (a) Iron and copper artefacts from Upemba, in the classic Kisalian style; (b) and (c) Early Kisalian pottery from the Upemba Rift (Shaba)



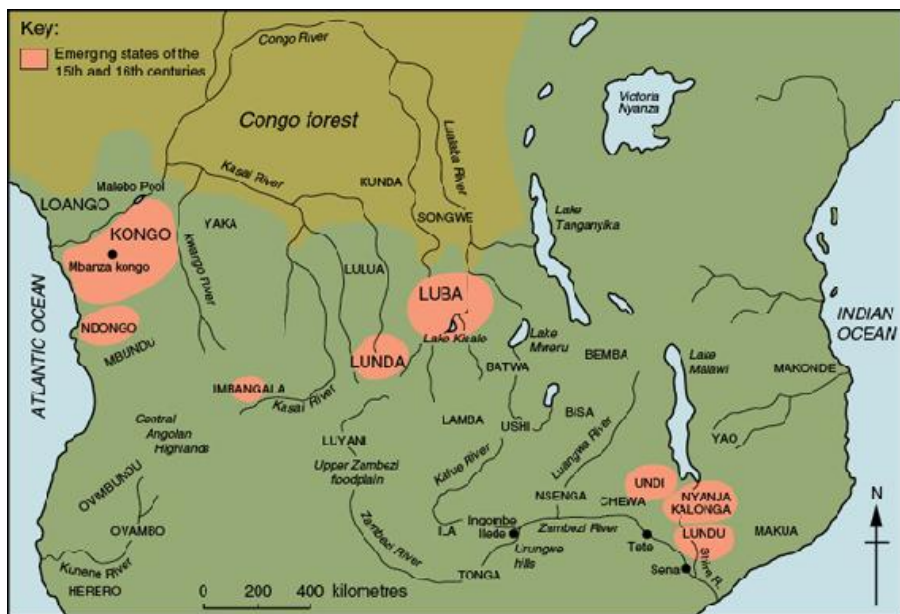
Origins of the Lunda Empire

Before the arrival of the dispossessed Luba royals, the Lunda had no

centralised chieftaincy, although they had a senior chief. The incoming Luba royals cemented their position by marrying into the family of the senior chief. In Lunda oral tradition, this is personified in the person of Chibunda Ilunga, who married the Lunda queen Rweej (or Lueji). The descendants of this marriage produced a new Lunda dynasty, which, during the sixteenth century, assumed the title *Mwaant Yaav* or *Mwata Yamvo* ('The Lord of Vipers'). They established a settled capital and, claiming sacred authority, strengthened the pre-existing loose ties between the Lunda chiefdoms. In doing so, they drew the loosely scattered Lunda chiefdoms into a single, centralised and expanding empire. The main period of growth and power of the Lunda Empire was the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the foundations of the state had been laid by 1600.

The Lunda of the fifteenth century were less densely populated than the Luba. They lived in a large number of small villages where they practised farming, fishing, hunting and trading. Their technology, arts and crafts were less developed than those of the Luba. The small number of incoming royal Luba were thus able to bring to the region the finer elements of Later Iron Age metalworking technology. The Luba concept of a centralised religious kingship, however, was adapted to local circumstances and, as a result, provided a solid base for future territorial expansion. Lunda religious practices were respected and Lunda chiefs were left in place as the guardians of local spirits and 'owners of the land'. In return, they were required to pay tribute to the newly centralised Lunda king, but were entitled to a position as advisers to the royal court. The king kept the loyalty of this 'confederation' of Lunda chieftaincies by appointing a *cilool* or *kilolo* as royal 'adviser' and tax-collecting agent within each local chiefdom.

South-central Africa in the Later Iron Age



The spread of Lunda titles

From the time of the early founding of the united Lunda kingdom, dynastic rivals from within the royal family moved away to found their own dynasties among the peoples to the south and west. Kingship among the Luena and Luyana (later Lozi) of the upper Zambezi of modern western Zambia was reputed to have distant Lunda origins. One of the more important of these Lunda ‘dispersals’ bore the title *Kinguri*. The original *Kinguri* was reputed in oral tradition to be the brother of the Lunda queen Rweej. He founded a hunting and raiding state in the central highlands of modern Angola. Here, there was no attempt made to take over and utilise existing chiefly practices. Men and women from surrounding villages were incorporated into the new state by elaborate initiation ceremonies. By 1550, the rulers of this militaristic state had assumed the title of *Kasanje* and their people became the Imbangala.

Peoples of central and southern Angola

Meanwhile, among the Mbundu-speaking peoples of modern Angola, chieftaincy and kingship were already developing along similar religious lines to those of the Luba and the Lunda. The principal Mbundu-speaking peoples were the Ndongo, Pende and Libolo. By the fourteenth century, the guardians of their rain-making shrines were assuming the positions of chiefs and exacting tribute for their services.

In a number of Ndongo villages, the guardians of the shrines were also known to possess important metalworking skills. They used the title *Ngola* (from which the name of the modern state of Angola is derived). It was possibly they who first introduced new Later Iron Age technology to the region. Whatever their source of power, they used it to weld the Ndongo chiefdoms together into a single united state. By 1500, there was a single *Ngola a Kiluanje* ruling over the Ndongo.

Very little is known of the peoples further south except that by the fifteenth century, groups of Ovimbundu and Ovambo were practising mixed farming along the southern slopes of the central Angolan highlands. Further south still, in the dry grasslands bordering modern Namibia, the Herero were pursuing a mainly pastoral existence.

The Kingdom of Kongo

One of the most important kingdoms to arise in west-central Africa was the Kingdom of Kongo. The origins of the state can be traced to a group of small prosperous farming villages just north of Malebo Pool on the lower Congo River (see [Map 9.1](#)). This, like the Lake Kisale region of the upper Lualaba, was a particularly fruitful zone for the development of Later Iron Age skills and practices: the production of food surpluses, the promotion of manufacturing crafts and the development of trade. On the margins of forest and savannah woodlands, soils were fertile and rainfall plentiful. There were sources of copper, iron and salt within easy trading distance. The river and its tributaries encouraged the development of fishing. In addition, the Malebo Pool itself was a major trading crossroads. It was above the rapids of the lower river and had thousands of kilometres of navigable waterways stretching away upstream.

By the early fourteenth century, the main group of Bakongo villages extended across the fertile uplands just south of the lower Congo. Being basically farming people, their religious practices centred on their shrines to the 'spirits of the land'. The guardians of these shrines were called *mani kabunga*. By 1400, the Bakongo villages south of the Congo River had been loosely united into a single kingdom with its capital at Mbanza Kongo. The king bore the title *Manikongo*. Bakongo arts and crafts were highly developed. They were skilled metalworkers, potters and weavers. Fine cloth woven from the fibres of the raffia palm was widely traded as far as the Atlantic coast where it was exchanged for salt and sea shells for use as local currency. Minor neighbouring communities were prepared to pay tribute to the Manikongo in order to gain his protection and partake in this burgeoning trading system. And the tribute system itself

stimulated further interregional trade. Thus, by the early sixteenth century, the Manikongo held authority over the region from the Atlantic in the west to the Kwango River in the east (see [Map 9.1](#)).

The indigenous development of the Kingdom of Kongo was disrupted after the 1480s by the arrival of the Portuguese and their increasing demands for a trade in slaves. The consequences of this will be considered in [Chapter 14](#).

The 'Luangwa tradition' in eastern Zambia and kingship in Malawi

Much of east-central Africa from central Zambia to Lake Malawi seems to have belonged to a single Later Iron Age culture known through its pottery as the 'Luangwa tradition'. This seems to have spread fairly quickly between 1000 and 1200. There was a wider use of iron, especially axes to clear woodland for cultivation, and an increasing emphasis on the herding of cattle. Ivory hunting, copper manufacture and trade were also important. Although the origins and source of the Luangwa tradition remain unclear, there are clear cultural links between these Later Iron Age peoples and the Bemba, Bisa and Chewa of modern times.

In central and southern Malawi, the concept of chieftaincy emerged from the religious cults that centred on the guardians of the 'spirits of the land', especially those responsible for rain and soil fertility. Around 1400, the Phiri clan gained ascendancy among the chiefs of the Nyanja just south of Lake Malawi by marrying into the local Banda clan. They took the royal title of *Kalonga*. The Phiri clan's concept of religious kingship is believed, in oral tradition, to have come originally from the Luba. Whether they were direct migrants from Lubaland is not known for sure.

In the course of the sixteenth century, offshoots from the Kalonga dynasty founded the Lundu dynasty among the Manganja of the Shire valley and the Undi dynasty among the Chewa between the Shire and Zambezi Rivers. Fire played an important role in the religious rituals of the Phiri clan. The peoples of the Kalonga, Lundu and Undi kingdoms were known collectively as 'Maravi', meaning 'peoples of the fire'. It is in memory of these people that the modern Republic of Malawi takes its name. The region was a rich field for ivory hunting. Control of the ivory trade down the Shire and Zambezi Rivers to the Indian Ocean coast may have been an important source of power for the early Maravi kings. It was certainly exploited by the Kalonga kings of the seventeenth century, as we shall see in [Chapter 14](#).

Cattle keeping and state formation south of the Zambezi

As we have already seen, one of the features of Later Iron Age societies was an increasing use of cattle. An area where this played an important role in early state formation was in the open grassland zones south of the Zambezi River.

The importance of cattle

First, cattle were a useful source of food, both milk and meat. Although beef was not often eaten, except by the wealthy or on special occasions, it could be used in times of shortage. Cattle could also be traded with neighbouring communities in exchange for food or for iron and other necessary goods.

Second, cattle were a major source of wealth and social control. In general, in Later Iron Age societies, there was a growing division between rich and poor and a greater domination by men over women. This was especially the case in cattle-keeping societies. Through a process of natural increase, a herd of less than 20 cattle could, in favourable conditions, multiply to several thousand within a single human generation. This enabled men to accumulate wealth to pass on to future generations. And it was men who controlled the social use of cattle.

Cattle provided men with their main source of bridewealth. Men with large herds of cattle could pay a dowry for several wives, and since women were the main cultivators of the soil, this increased a man's capacity to produce a surplus of food. This, in turn, could be used for trading, as well as feeding his large family and their dependants. Those without cattle became dependent on the wealthy by herding their cattle in return for milk or borrowing cattle from them to pay their own bridewealth. Wealthy cattle owners thus gained control over an ever-widening community. In this way, cattle provided the material basis for the early development of chieftaincy.

One of the more important zones where specialised cattle keeping developed at an early date was between the Limpopo River and the Kalahari Desert in the eastern-central region of modern Botswana.

Early cattle-keeping communities in eastern Botswana

The dry open grassland of eastern Botswana, watered by springs and seasonal streams, was ideal for the rapid growth of cattle herds. Here, between 650 and 1300 CE, a complex system of hilltop settlements

was developed. Archaeologists have named it the ‘Toutswe tradition’ after Toutswemogala, the largest of the sites (see [Map 9.2](#)).

On large, flat-topped hills, circular pole and clay houses thatched with grass were built around central enclosures where cattle were kept at night. The hill locations were probably originally chosen to offer defence from wild animals. They also gave the cattle owners control over the surrounding area. The region was dominated by three large hilltop settlements, possibly representing chiefdoms. Each of these was surrounded by numerous smaller hilltop villages, while herdsman and cultivators lived within the valleys. The wealth of the hilltop dwellers is shown by their regular consumption of beef instead of game meat. Iron was imported from the iron-rich Tswapong Hills of the south, where specialist smelters operated over a long period of time. Other trading contacts stretched further afield and glass beads were imported, indirectly, from the Indian Ocean coast (see [Map 9.2](#)).

In about 1300, the Toutswe sites were abandoned. It was a period of persistent drought and the region was probably suffering from generations of overgrazing. Nevertheless, by then, cattle-keeping practices developed here had probably already influenced their adoption elsewhere. There is no evidence of large-scale migration from the region after 1300, although this may have been what happened. But with their herds decimated by the destruction of their pasture, the Toutswe people may equally well have reverted to a hunter-gatherer existence or become the dependants of other cattle-keeping communities. Several of these were rising in the damper grasslands further east.

Cattle keeping, agriculture and the growth of trade: Leopard’s Kopje and Mapungubwe

On the Zimbabwe plateau, a Later Iron Age, cattle-keeping culture had developed around the region of modern Bulawayo by about the tenth century. This is known as Leopard’s Kopje, after the site where it was first identified (see [Map 9.2](#)). The Leopard’s Kopje people were in an area of slightly higher rainfall than that of the Toutswe people and so were able to develop more of a mixed economy of cattle keeping and cultivation. In particular, they developed the technique of terracing the hillsides on the southern slopes of the plateau in order to prevent erosion of the fertile soils. One such site was Mapela, where, during the twelfth century, a whole hillside was terraced with dry stone walls for housing, defence and cultivation. These were prosperous communities, producing a surplus and engaging in long-distance trade.

Another feature of the Leopard's Kopje culture was the development of gold mining. The western plateau was rich in gold-bearing rock and this was worked intensively by Iron Age miners between the tenth and eighteenth centuries. Narrow shafts were sunk, following seams down 30 metres or more until the seam ran out or the water table was reached. The rock was cracked by alternate use of fire and water and broken out with iron wedges. Lightly built girls were often used to squeeze down the shaft and break out the ore. A number of their skeletons have been found at the bottom of long-abandoned shafts. Once brought to the surface, the ore was crushed and the gold panned out in the running water of nearby streams. Little is known about the organisation and control of mining labour, but it probably involved a considerable amount of coercion. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the production and trade of gold provided those who controlled it with a major source of wealth.

The early Leopard's Kopje culture of western Zimbabwe reached its climax with the development of Mapungubwe on the southern side of the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers. This community started at Bambandyanalo during the tenth century but had expanded to nearby Mapungubwe Hill by 1100. This area enabled the development of floodplain agriculture, an innovation unique to the region. It was from this agricultural base, combined with cattle keeping, that the Mapungubwe state drew its basic strength. Other factors, however, contributed to the way the state developed, especially with regard to the sharp division that archaeology has revealed between a wealthy ruling élite and the mass of poorer dependants. The former lived in substantial clay-built houses on the top of the hill, their settlement dominated by a central cattle enclosure. Whatever the strength of their wealth in cattle, the combination of ivory hunting, mining and long-distance trade was a major contributor to the wealth and political power of the ruling élite of Mapungubwe.

Later Iron Age states south of the Zambezi, 900–1600



The state was strongly placed for the development of long-distance trade. Elephants were plentiful in the Limpopo valley, copper was mined locally and gold was brought down from the plateau to the north. The Limpopo valley itself provided a convenient route to the east African coast. The main exports eastwards were ivory and gold in exchange for glass and shell beads and brightly coloured Indian cloth. Small quantities of delicate Chinese celadon (green-glazed pottery) were imported for the rulers.

After 1300, Mapungubwe declined in favour of Great Zimbabwe, which was even better positioned for the development of raising cattle, cultivation and long-distance trade. The decline may also have been occasioned by the cooler, drier climate of this period, which, as observed above, may have contributed to the abandonment of the Toutswe sites of eastern Botswana at about this time.

The origins and character of the Great Zimbabwe

tradition

The modern republic of Zimbabwe is named after the stone enclosures of 'Great Zimbabwe', which were abandoned more than 500 years ago and now lie in ruins (see Figures 9.4a–9.4e). They were originally built between 1200 and 1450 by the Later Iron Age ancestors of the Shona of the modern republic. The growth of Great Zimbabwe was a further extension of the Later Iron Age developments begun by the peoples of Leopard's Kopje and Mapungubwe. Great Zimbabwe itself was the centre or capital of a large and thriving early Shona state. The word *zimbabwe* (plural *madzimbabwe*) comes from the Shona *dzimba dzamabwe*, meaning 'stone buildings'.

The use of dry stone walling for cattle enclosures and encircling the houses of the wealthy was not unusual among Later Iron Age cattle-keeping peoples of southern Africa. What was unusual about Great Zimbabwe was their elaborate development, first on the hilltop and later, from the early fourteenth century, in the valley. By 1400, the stonemasons of Great Zimbabwe had developed their craft into a fine art. The 10-metre high great enclosure in the valley (see [Figure 9.5c](#)) shows early Shona stonemasonry at its finest. The techniques developed here for building walls to such a height without the use of mortar were unique in the whole of Africa.

The original stoneworks on the hilltop may have been intended for defence or to impress potential enemies from afar. But it is unlikely that the later elaborate enclosures of the valley were ever built for defensive purposes. They encircled the clay-built dwellings of the country's rulers and their walls were tall and powerful, but there was no easy access to the top from which to repel attackers. Historians are led to conclude that the main purpose of the Great Zimbabwe enclosures was to emphasise and enhance the mystery, power and prestige of the king.

The site for this capital was chosen for its valuable position on the southeastern edge of the Zimbabwe plateau. Cattle were very important to the early Zimbabwean economy, and here at Great Zimbabwe was a wide range of upland and lowland seasonal grazing. Game was widespread, especially elephant for ivory hunting. In addition, there was a plentiful supply of timber for firewood and building and well-watered fertile soil for cultivation. But perhaps most important of all for the growth of Great Zimbabwe's power and wealth was the capital's strategic position for trade. Standing at the head of the Sabi River valley, it was ideally situated for exploiting the long-distance trade between the goldfields of the western plateau and the Swahili of the Sofala coast. It is no coincidence that the rise of Great

Zimbabwe coincided with the rise of Kilwa. It was Great Zimbabwe that supplied the Swahili of the port of Kilwa with the gold and ivory that made theirs the richest coastal town between 1300 and 1450 (see [Chapter 10](#)).

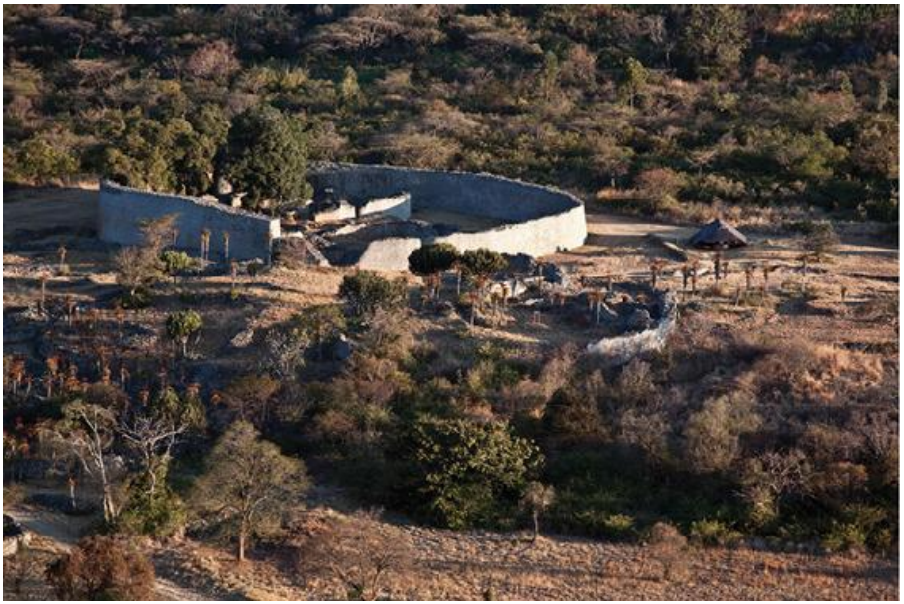
Figure 9.4 The Great Zimbabwe ruins, a UNESCO World Heritage site

(a) The hilltop had been an important early Shona religious site before it became a political capital. Building enclosures in stone began on the hilltop with the rise of political power from c.1200 ce. Centuries of weathering had split slabs from the rounded granite boulders, like the skin of an onion. These were roughly shaped to join the gaps between the boulders and thus form a series of stone enclosures.



Source: 2630Ben/iStock.

(b) By c.1300, dry stone walling techniques had been refined and construction of a great royal enclosure was begun in the valley below, viewed here from the hilltop, in the middle distance. During the fourteenth century, the whole of the intervening valley would have been cleared of bush and covered with small stone enclosures and circular mud and thatch houses.



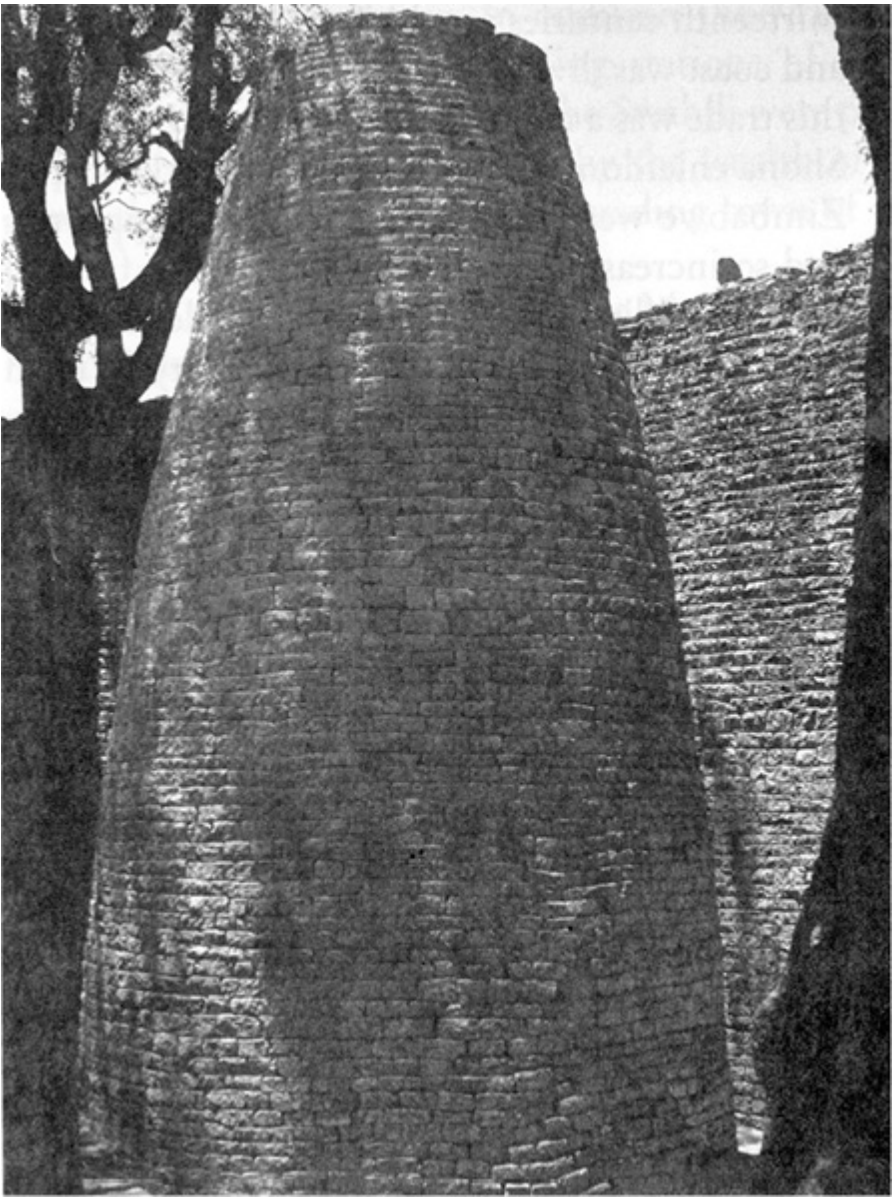
Source: 2630Ben/iStock.

(c) The original perimeter wall of the royal enclosure (left) was later surrounded by an even larger wall (right), leaving a narrow passageway through which supplicants could approach the king.



Source: gumboot/iStock.

(d) At the heart of the complex of royal enclosures lay a solid circular construction, thought to represent a grain storage silo that probably had symbolic religious or political significance.



Source: Kevin Shillington.

(e) The final exterior wall of the royal enclosure was topped by a chevron pattern, which was to become a characteristic of the western capital of Khami, after Great Zimbabwe had been abandoned in c.1450. The Great Zimbabwe hilltop remained an important religious site until at least the end of the nineteenth century.



Source: 2630Ben/iStock.

The rise of Great Zimbabwe

The state of Great Zimbabwe probably started as a prosperous centre for cattle-keeping and farming peoples, with the ownership of cattle leading to considerable divisions between rich and poor. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, much of the long-distance trade between the western plateau and the coast was diverted to pass via the Great Zimbabwe capital. Taxation from this trade was a major source of wealth, in addition to the tribute paid by local Shona chiefdoms in ivory, gold and food. With this wealth, the rulers of Great Zimbabwe were able to reward their supporters and feed their dependants and so increase their power.



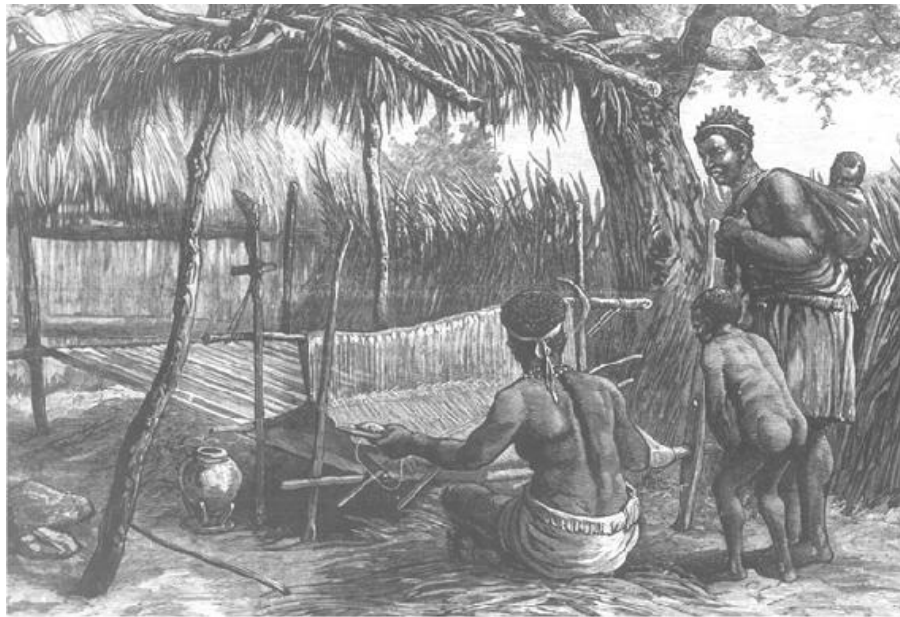
The legend that future colonial adventurers ascribed to Great Zimbabwe is addressed in more detail in ‘Colonial Myth-Making and Great Zimbabwe’ on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

The building of elaborate stone enclosures at the capital was extended into the valley during the fourteenth century. Within the great enclosure was the main residence or 'palace' of the king. Here, he and his court lived in some luxury, surrounded by gold and copper ornaments and jewellery and eating off fine imported plates made in Persia and China. At the same time, similar smaller madzimbabwe were built over a wide area of the eastern plateau, probably as centres of provincial government. Great Zimbabwe itself became a major focus, not only of trade, but also of craft manufacture. Resident craftsmen at the capital worked gold and copper into fine jewellery and forged imported iron into a wide range of tools. There is also evidence from throughout the region of the extensive weaving of cloth from locally grown cotton. Even so, wealthy people still imported brightly coloured Indian cotton from the coast.

The abandonment of Great Zimbabwe

In about 1450, the site of Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. By then the cultivation, grazing and timber resources of the region were exhausted. Oral tradition also refers to a shortage of salt. The movement of settlement sites was a regular feature of Later Iron Age times, as it was necessary to allow exhausted agricultural land to recover. This had reached a critical stage at Great Zimbabwe by the fifteenth century. It has been estimated that at that time there were as many as 11,000 people living in or around the 'city' of Great Zimbabwe. By 1450, the region could no longer support them. There was also a sharp decline in the price of gold from the mid-fifteenth century. This may have been related to the increasing transportation of gold across the eastern Sahara that accompanied the rise of Songhay in the mid- to late fifteenth century. Any fall in the gold price would have affected the wealth and power of Zimbabwe's ruling élite, and this may have contributed to their loss of control of the centralised Great Zimbabwe state. From about 1450, the main focus of the region's long-distance trade shifted northwards towards the Zambezi valley. It was during this period that Ingombe Ilede briefly flourished. This was quickly followed by the rise of the Mutapa state at the head of the Mazoe valley (see below).

Figure 9.5 Weaving in the Shire valley in the 1860s, using locally grown cotton and Later Iron Age techniques.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The Torwa state

A close successor to Great Zimbabwe was the Torwa state founded in the Leopard's Kopje region of Guruuswa (or Butua) at around the time of the abandonment of the Great Zimbabwe site. Its capital, Khami, was probably founded by fifteenth-century migrants from Great Zimbabwe. Here, the dry stone walling traditions of Great Zimbabwe were further developed and refined. Hills were terraced and dry stone walls were elaborately decorated by the layering of carefully trimmed stones. Besides being the centre of the goldfields of the western plateau, the region was particularly suited to the grazing of large herds of cattle. This was to provide the basis for the development of Changamire's Rozvi state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see [Chapter 14](#)).

The growth of the Mutapa state

According to Shona oral tradition, the Mutapa state was founded by Nyatsimbe Mutota, who had been sent north from Great Zimbabwe to seek out a new source of salt. This is thought to have occurred in about 1420. Mutota, accompanied by a small military force, arrived in the Dande area around the head of the Mazoe valley where the northern Shona were already settled. Here was an apparently ideal site for the founding of an alternative state to that of Great Zimbabwe.

It had fertile soil, good rainfall and plenty of woodland for building. In addition, the Mazoe valley gave access to the Zambezi and the Swahili trading stations of Sena and Tete, which were established at about this time (see [Map 9.2](#)).

Mutota and his son and successor Matope quickly took advantage of the favourable position of the Dande area. Using the small but powerful army that had accompanied Mutota from Great Zimbabwe, they established control over the northern Shona of the region. Mutota and his successors took the title *Munhumutapa* (or *Mwene Mutapa*), meaning ‘Conqueror’ or ‘Master pillager’, which can be taken as some sign of their relationship with their subject people.

Meanwhile, the valuable Swahili trading stations of Sena and Tete in the lower Zambezi had probably been founded originally thanks to the wealth of copper and ivory coming down the valley from the inland trading town of Ingombe Ilede. This was an important fifteenth-century trading terminus and craft centre situated 600 kilometres upstream from Tete. The craftsmen of Ingombe Ilede turned gold from northern Zimbabwe into beads and bracelets and copper into cross-shaped ingots for use as a trading currency. In the 1450s, however, Mutapa took over from Great Zimbabwe as the principal Shona state of the interior plateau, and Ingombe Ilede went into premature decline, unable to compete with this powerful new northern Shona state. By the end of the reign of Matope in the 1480s, the Munhumutapa’s tribute demands extended eastwards into the coastal lowlands to include the states of Uteve, Barwe and Manyika.

There were a number of important differences between the Mutapa state and that of its predecessor Great Zimbabwe. The rulers of Mutapa came in as outsiders and used an army to maintain control over their subject peoples. This ensured that local village headmen paid them regular tribute. The northern Shona did not have a stone-building tradition and the Munhumutapa’s pole and clay houses were enclosed by a wooden palisade. Furthermore, unlike the rulers of Great Zimbabwe, who imported their gold from the west, the rulers of Mutapa had their own supply of gold ready to hand. The Mazoe region was a valuable source of alluvial gold, which could readily be washed in the streams that cut through the gold-bearing rocks of the northern plateau. Peasant farmers of the gold-bearing regions were expected to provide a certain amount of regular labour by mining gold for the king. Most of the gold was used in foreign trade with the coast to purchase beads, coloured cloth and other luxuries for the country’s rulers. Despite the importance of trade for the ruling élite, however, the main support of the Mutapa state was its strong agricultural base.

Figure 9.6 Shona girls in Zimbabwe, early twentieth century, wearing the sort of ornamental bangles and beaded leather skirts that were probably common in the Later Iron Age period.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The Mutapa state and the Portuguese

Chapter 10 explores Portuguese attempts to seize control of the Swahili trade in gold in the early decades of the sixteenth century. By then, the export of Zimbabwean gold had switched from the Sabi valley and Sofala to the Mazoe valley and the Zambezi. From there, the Swahili deliberately evaded Portuguese control by diverting their outbound trade to a different coastal port. The Portuguese responded by sending a small army up the Zambezi in the 1530s and seizing the Swahili trading posts of Sena and Tete. From there, they then established direct trading contact with the Munhumutapa's court and diverted the Zambezi valley trade to their own fortress town of Mozambique.

Initially, the Portuguese were prepared to pay tribute to the Munhumutapa for permission to trade within his territory. But, frustrated by the small amount of gold they could legally buy, they

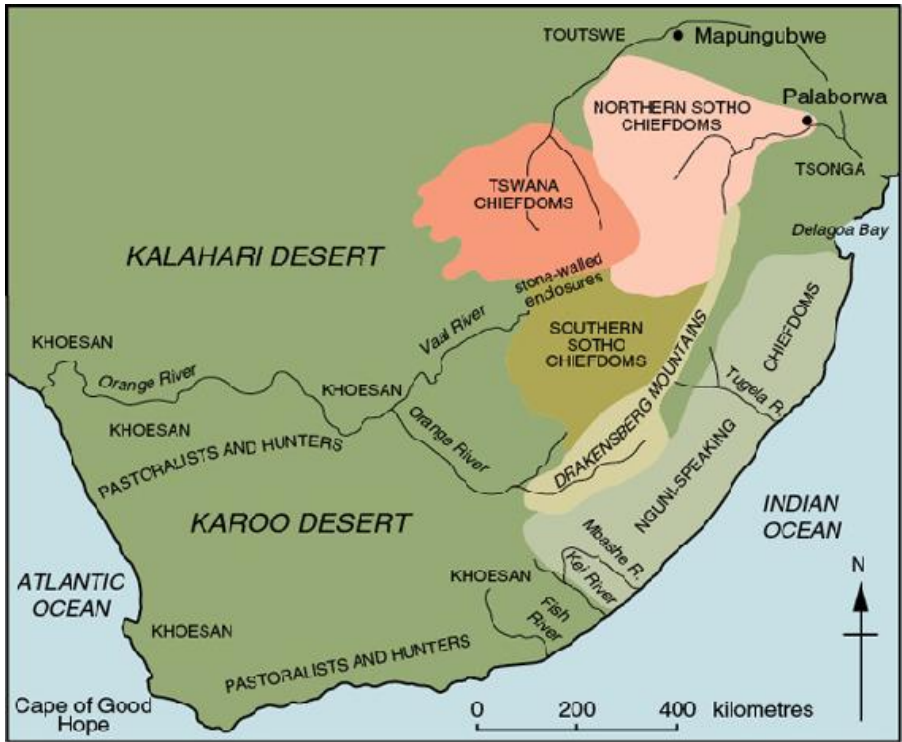
determined to gain personal control over the Munhumutapa and operate the gold mines themselves. After an unsuccessful attempt to convert the Munhumutapa to Christianity, the Portuguese launched an all-out invasion in 1571. But the invading army never left the Zambezi valley. It was defeated by drought, disease and determined resistance from the local Tonga of the valley. Another invasion in 1574 managed to force the ruler of Uteve to agree to pay tribute to the Portuguese at Sofala. But the Mutapa state remained beyond Portuguese control and ended the century still the dominant independent state of the eastern plateau.

Cattle-keeping peoples south of the Limpopo

South of the Limpopo there was a general expansion of cattle keeping as woodland was cleared and more upland grassland was brought into regular use. Later Iron Age developments between 1000 and 1400 CE saw the gradual emergence of chiefdoms in the region. As already observed for the Toutswe tradition, cattle often provided the material basis of chieftaincy. Certain clans, wealthy in cattle, established ruling lineages (or dynasties) over large numbers of dependants. The spiritual power of chieftaincy in these patriarchal societies was based on the chief's links with the ancestors. This stemmed largely from his reputed descent from the sometimes mythical founding hero of the clan. In practical terms, his claim to chieftaincy was often assessed in terms of his rain-making powers.

The ancestral lineage of the chiefs of the modern Sotho-Tswana of the southern African highveld can be traced to about this time. Whereas, linguistically, the Early Iron Age Bantu speakers of southern Africa seem to have links with the ancestral language of the Shona people of the Zimbabwe plateau, the Sotho-Tswana people seem to have more of a linguistic link to east African Bantu speakers. This posits the interesting theory that they may have stemmed from new immigrants in the fourteenth century. Archaeological evidence suggests a fairly rapid spread of Sotho-Tswana settlements across the northern plateau of modern South Africa from about that time. The evidence of their settlements is shown in the large number of stone-walled enclosures and stone house foundations that have been found across the highveld north and south of the Vaal River (see [Figure 9.7](#)). Some of these house foundations bear a striking resemblance to the architecture of southern Tswana houses observed by European travellers in the early nineteenth century.

The Later Iron Age south of the Limpopo



In the dry highveld grassland northwest of the Vaal River, the early Tswana lineages evolved fairly large chiefdoms based on central towns of several thousand people. Their concentrations of population were probably related to limited sources of water. When they became too large or were torn by succession disputes, chiefdoms split and subdivided. Wealthy rivals led their supporters and dependants away to found new chiefdoms and begin the process again.

Southeast of the mountains of Drakensberg, rainfall was greater and the environment more varied. Within any one small area, people had a wide range of hill and valley grazing, woodland and land for cultivation. As a result, chiefdoms could be smaller and settlements more self-contained. Here, the ancestors of the modern Nguni-speaking peoples founded a wide range of small chiefdoms stretching from the River Kei to Delagoa Bay (see [Map 9.3](#)).

Nguni is the name given to a southern subgroup of the Bantu language family. There is no such thing as 'the Nguni language' or

‘the Nguni people’ as such. It is merely a convenient modern term used by linguists and historians to refer to the linguistically related peoples of the southeastern lowveld. In this way, they can be distinguished from the Sotho-Tswana of the highveld.

Figure 9.7 The stone foundations of a typical Sotho-Tswana dwelling of the Later Iron Age period exposed by archaeological diggings. The semi-circular line of stones in the foreground formed a low outer stone wall, with a gap for entrance to a covered veranda. The two circular stone platforms in the centre formed the foundation for the clay floor of an outer and an inner room, with walls of clay and pole. The semi-circular line of stones in the background enclosed store rooms and cooking area. A single thatched roof would have covered both inner rooms and outer veranda.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

These chiefdoms were often little more than groups of several extended family homesteads under the leadership of the head of the senior clan. Here too, when population grew and disputes over leadership emerged, chiefdoms split and rivals moved off to found new settlements. As with the Sotho-Tswana of the highveld, although they were farmers, metalworkers, craftsmen and traders, the main source of their material wealth was their large herds of sleek, fat cattle. This point was clearly noted by a Portuguese sailor who was shipwrecked off the southeast coast in 1593. He travelled safely

through the region all the way from the Mbashe River to Delagoa Bay and wrote of the peoples he observed:

These people are herdsmen and cultivators ... Their main crop is millet which they grind between two stones or in wooden mortars to make flour. From this they make cakes, which they bake under the embers of the fire. Of the same grain they make beer ... Their cattle are numerous, fat, tender, tasty and large, the pastures being very fertile. Their wealth consists mainly in their huge number of dehorned cows. They also subsist on cows' milk and on the butter which they make from it. They live together in small villages, in houses made of reed mats ... The main clothing ... is a cloak of calf-skin, rubbed with grease to make it soft. On their feet they wear shoes of two or three layers of raw hide, fastened together in a round shape and secured to the foot with thongs. With these they can run with great speed.¹

During the process of expansion of Later Iron Age chiefdoms, the Khoesan-speaking hunter-gatherers and specialist pastoralists were gradually absorbed. The presence of the characteristic Khoesan 'click' sounds in the southern Nguni and southern Sotho languages is evidence of this process. But Later Iron Age farmers did not extend their settlements beyond the region of regular summer rainfall. Thus, in the drier southwestern part of the continent, Khoesan communities retained their distinctive languages and cultures. But even here they did not develop in isolation. They traded with Bantu-speaking farmers, selling sheep, cattle and hunting produce in exchange for copper, iron, dagga (cannabis) and tobacco. Khoekhoe clans of sheep and cattle pastoralists, in particular, thrived in the winter rainfall grasslands of the extreme southwestern Cape of Good Hope. It was this source of meat that first attracted European shipping to the region, with consequences that will be discussed in [Chapter 15](#).



Visit the online resources at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/student-zone

(CUP: Cambridge), pp. 121–2.

CHAPTER 10

Trading towns of the east African coast to the sixteenth century

There have been periodic references to Indian Ocean trade in earlier chapters of this book. Most of these have concerned trading contacts between Egypt, the Red Sea coast and Aksum/Ethiopia on the one hand, and the states of the Persian Gulf and western India on the other. This chapter is concerned with the origins and growth of Swahili trading towns along much of the east African coastline and their contribution to the further development of Indian Ocean trade.

Historians in the colonial period tended to overemphasise the Arab input to the early growth of east African coastal trade. This view placed all the initiative in the hands of Islamic Arab immigrants, and early research focused on the Arab contribution to the language and culture of the Kiswahili-speaking peoples. In this view, Arabs were portrayed as the prime movers in developments. It was they who drew coastal Africans into their own trading culture, thereby creating the Afro-Arab combination that founded the Swahili trading towns. However, no longer hampered by the racial assumptions of colonial historiography, research during the second half of the twentieth century has shown that the past emphasis on Arab input has been misleading. This is not to deny the extremely important contribution of Islamic Arab immigrants to the further development of Swahili culture and trading networks, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But what previously tended to be overlooked was the extent of the indigenous African input to the early development of coastal trade and the spread of Swahili culture and society.



The extent to which Arab or African influences were the more crucial in the development of (Ki)Swahili culture remains a topic of historical debate. For more on this, see ‘Swahili Historiography “Arab or African”’ at the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

The origins of east African coastal trading society

Azania: the east African coast to 500 ce

The east African coast was known to the Greek and Roman traders of the early centuries CE. They referred to the region as ‘Azania’. The earliest known written reference to the land of Azania is in a mid-first-century Greek handbook, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (The Voyage of the Indian Ocean)*. Written in the great Egyptian trading port of Alexandria, it was intended for Greek trading ships, as a guide to the known ports of the Indian Ocean. It refers to a series of market towns along the Azanian coast from which overseas traders were able to obtain ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell and a little coconut oil. In exchange for these goods, traders from Arabia and the Red Sea provided the Azanians with iron tools and weapons, cotton cloth and a small quantity of wheat and wine. The *Periplus* referred to ‘Rhapta’ as the most southerly known port on the coast of Azania. The exact site of Rhapta has not yet been identified, but it is thought to have been situated either somewhere in the Rufiji delta, in the central coastal region of modern Tanzania (see [Map 10.1](#)), or possibly close to Dar es Salaam, opposite Zanzibar Island.

The east African coast, 500 ce



The peoples of Azania were clearly experienced fishermen, well practised in the use of small boats along the coastal waters offshore. They fished and caught turtles from dugout canoes and they sailed among the islands in small coastal boats made of wooden planks knotted together with lengths of coconut fibre. Each market town was under the rule of its own chief, although the *Periplus* tells us little more about the people except that they were tall and dark-skinned. A few Arab traders were known to have settled in the region, intermarried with the local people and adopted their language. But

there is no sign that these early Arab settlers had any significant impact or influence on the Azanians. They were settling within already existing fishing and trading communities.

Who exactly these early Azanians were is not known for sure. Archaeological research has not yet revealed evidence of any of their early coastal market towns. Future archaeological research might reveal pottery or other artefacts, which would tell us more about them. In the meantime, it seems likely that they were part of the developing east African Early Iron Age, probably Bantu speaking, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). The report of the *Periplus*, that they imported iron goods, need not contradict this. They may simply have found it easier to import manufactured iron goods rather than spend the time and effort smelting and making their own. They probably adopted the fishing techniques already developed by pre-existing hunting and fishing communities. The use of 'sewn' boats and the presence of the coconut suggest some early contact with the sort of Austronesian sailors who colonised Madagascar in the early centuries CE. But it does not appear that any Austronesians actually settled permanently on the coast at this time. What is known from archaeological and linguistic evidence is that by at least the fifth century CE, Bantu-speaking farmers and fishermen were well established along the east African coast.

The Land of Zenj: the east African coast to 1000 ce

Indian Ocean trade was given a great boost by the spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. The shift of the Islamic capital to Baghdad in 750 CE brought the Persian Gulf more firmly into Indian Ocean trading networks. A number of Shi'ite refugees from southern Arabia settled along the northern half of the east African coastline during the eighth century. They intermarried with the African population and learnt the local language. The increasing presence of Arabic-speaking peoples on the offshore islands greatly eased trading relations between the east African coast and the rest of the Muslim world. Arabic writers of the time referred to the main central region of the east African coast as 'the Land of Zenj' (sometimes spelt 'Zanj').

In the western Indian Ocean, the monsoon winds blow towards east Africa between November and March, and towards India and the Persian Gulf between April and October. This seasonal pattern of monsoon winds largely influenced the pattern of cross-ocean trade that developed between the east African coast and the Islamic world of western Asia. Most of the long-distance trade of the western Indian Ocean was carried in Arab sailing ships known as dhows (see [Figure](#)

10.1). The journey across the ocean could take several months. This did not leave them much time for trading along the east African coast before they had to turn for home on the southwest monsoon. The more northerly ports of Mogadishu and Barawa and the Lamu islands thus became their most common ports of call. Local coastal trading was generally left in the hands of African traders who brought their goods to the principal market towns. This enabled merchants from across the ocean to complete their business quickly without wasting valuable time calling between one tiny settlement and the next.

As the demand for African ivory and, later, gold rose, so more Muslim Arabs settled in the island towns to try and direct the local trade to their advantage. The local African ruling family was generally happy to develop close relations with these early Muslim settlers, often through intermarriage. In this way, they were able to ensure that overseas Muslim merchants would feel welcome and be well received within the town.

Figure 10.1 An Arab dhow of the sort used in the Indian Ocean trade between east Africa, the Persian Gulf and India.



Source: Dorling Kindersley/Getty Images.

By the ninth century, there were a number of well-established market towns along the coast of the 'Land of Zenj' (see [Map 10.2](#)). Most were situated on the offshore islands. There were several on the Lamu islands off the northern Kenyan coast and others further south on Zanzibar, Kilwa and the Comoro Islands. Although clearly involved in overseas trade, they were nevertheless primarily local African towns. Archaeological evidence has shown that they were cattle-keeping, mixed farming communities who had added trade to their basic agricultural economy. Cattle were kept in central fenced enclosures and domestic houses were generally built on a circular pattern, made of mud brick and thatch. Most of the pottery that archaeologists have found in these sites was locally made, on a general east African Iron Age pattern. Small quantities of imported pottery from the Persian Gulf, western India and China confirm the trading link. The style of local pottery is remarkably similar through the 3,000-kilometre stretch of coastland from Mogadishu to Mozambique. This suggests close cultural links and regular sailing contacts between the various trading settlements along the coastal region.

The east African coast, 500–1000 ce



The coastal towns of this period were mainly exporters of raw materials and importers of manufactured goods and luxuries, oriental pottery, glassware and Indian silks and cottons. The main African commodity sought by overseas traders was ivory. This was in particularly high demand in China, where it was used for making ceremonial chairs for the nobility. In India, too, it was widely used for making ornately carved dagger handles and sword scabbards. The African elephant produces larger tusks than the Indian elephant and its ivory is of the finer, 'softer' texture most suitable for carving. Other

African exports included ambergris, a fossilised resin used for making perfume, and mangrove poles needed for building houses in the Persian Gulf. Captives were exported as slaves for the salt mines of Basra and the farming plantations at the head of the Persian Gulf. The slaves were numerous enough at Basra to rise in revolt ('the Zanj revolt') in 868 CE. A small amount of gold was also exported. It was brought to the northern coastal towns by the Zanj from 'the land of Sofala', somewhere to the south. There is some evidence too of cotton cloth as well as glass and shell beads being manufactured in some of the main coastal towns. These were clearly intended for trading to peoples of the interior for ivory and other products. Beads of this type, dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries, have been found in numerous archaeological sites far across the central and southern African interior.

The historian of the east African coast is fortunate in being able to draw on the written accounts of several contemporary Arabic-speaking visitors to the coast. Among the more important of these were historian and geographer al-Masudi in the tenth century and Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century. Al-Masudi visited the Land of Zanj in 916 on an Arab dhow from Oman in southeastern Arabia. He wrote:

The land of Zanj produces wild leopard skins. The people wear them as clothes, or export them to Muslim countries. They are the largest leopard skins and the most beautiful for making saddles ... They also export tortoise-shell for making combs, for which ivory is likewise used ... The Zanj are settled in that area, which stretches as far as Sofala, which is the furthest limit of the land and the end of the voyages made from Oman and Siraf on the sea of Zanj ... The Zanj use the ox as a beast of burden, for they have no horses, mules or camels in their land. ... There are many wild elephants in this land but no tame ones. The Zanj do not use them for war or anything else, but only hunt and kill them for their ivory. It is from this country that come tusks weighing fifty pounds and more. They usually go to Oman, and from there are sent to China and India. This is the chief trade route ...

The Zanj have an elegant language and men who preach in it. One of their holy men will often gather a crowd and exhort his hearers to please God in their lives and to be obedient to him. He explains the punishments that follow upon disobedience, and reminds them of their ancestors and kings of old. These people have no religious law: their kings rule by custom and by political expediency.

The Zanj eat bananas, which are as common among them as they are in India; but their staple food is millet and a plant called *kalari* which is pulled out of the earth like truffles. They also eat honey and meat. They have many islands where the coconut grows: its nuts are used as fruit by all the Zanj peoples. One of these islands, which is one or two days' sail from the coast, has a Muslim population and a royal family. This is the island of Kanbalu [thought to be modern Pemba].¹

The growth of Swahili trading towns

Origins of the Swahili

The name 'Swahili' originally came from the Arabic word *sahil* meaning 'coast'. Thus, 'Swahili' literally means 'the people of the coast'. Kiswahili, also known simply as Swahili, is today the most widely spoken of the east African languages. It is spoken all along the coastal region and in many parts of the interior. It has also been adopted as the official language of modern Tanzania. Kiswahili is a Bantu language to which a number of Arabic words have been added. It developed out of the language of the Early Iron Age peoples who appear to have lived in the region of the Tana valley and the Lamu islands. The Arabic additions came from Arab settlers who married into coastal society. They retained Arabic for writing and communicating with overseas traders, but used Kiswahili in their normal daily speech. In due course, Kiswahili was developed as a written language, using an Arabic script.

Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, the term 'Swahili' came to denote a distinctive coastal society that was Islamic in religion and culture, but primarily African in language and personnel. It was an urban, coastal trading culture and economy, and it is to the development of these Swahili towns that we now turn.

Figure 10.2 The Mtambwe Mkuu Hoard, a scatter of tiny, locally minted silver and copper coins found on Pemba Island, photographed before cleaning and identification. The coins are thought to date from between 980 and 1100 ce. Individually, they range from 7 to 12 mm in diameter and are so thin as to weigh less than a fifth of a gram each.



Source: Mark Horton. Reproduced with permission.

The period from about 970 to 1050 was one of renewed growth for the east African trading towns. This coincided with a rising demand for African ivory and gold in Byzantine Europe and Fatimid Egypt. There is evidence of further Muslim settlement on east African coastal islands. Al-Masudi's reference to the island of Kanbalu having a Muslim king suggests that this was unusual in the early tenth century. A century later it was more common, as Muslim influence increased. Mosques were built in some of the towns, as a number of African rulers converted to Islam or Muslim settlers married into local ruling families. Rectangular houses made of blocks of coral stone began to be built at some of the northern market towns. This was in the style of houses on the Dahlak islands of the Red Sea, suggesting closer links through this trade route with Egypt and the Mediterranean. There were general signs of growing prosperity, at least among the ruling classes. A number of wealthy merchant rulers began to mint their own coins out of silver and copper (see [Figure 10.2](#)). The gold Fatimid dinar remained the principal currency of international exchange, but

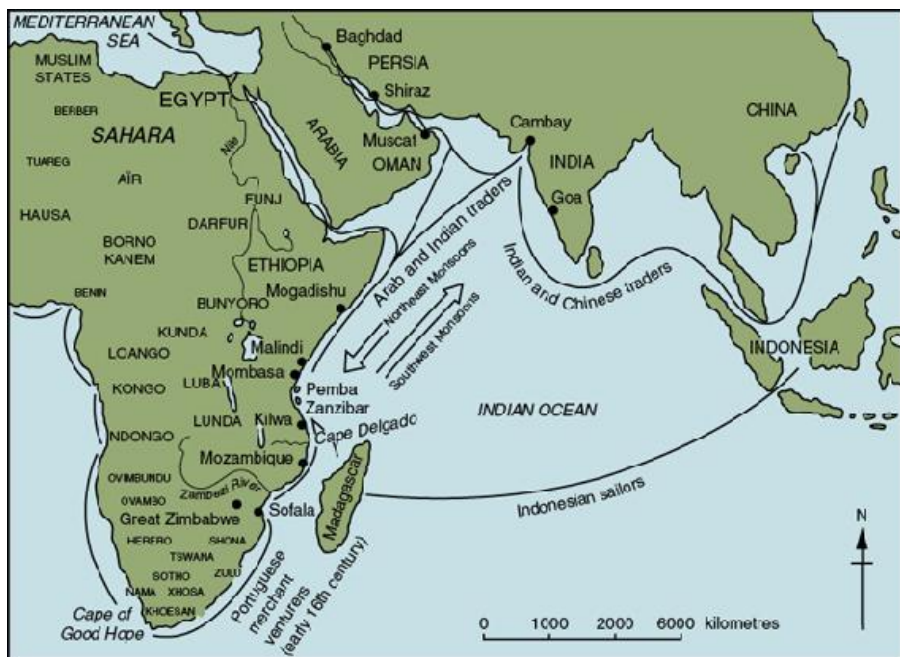
small local coins were used for local transactions.

The gold trade and the rise of Kilwa

The period 1050–1200 saw further Muslim immigration from the Persian Gulf and Oman. Possibly because of pressure from these newcomers, a number of northern Swahili Muslims, particularly from the Lamu islands, moved south to settle on the islands of Zanzibar, Mafia, Pemba, Kilwa and the Comoros. Here, they settled in existing trading towns and set up new dynasties that ruled the islands for generations to come. The leading members of these ruling families claimed to trace their Muslim ancestry to immigrants from Shiraz in the Persian Gulf. The dynasties they founded are therefore usually referred to as ‘Shirazi’. But there is no evidence of direct Persian immigration and it seems likely that some prominent northern Swahili families invented the connection for added status. From the time of this so-called Shirazi ‘migration’, houses made of blocks of coral stone began to be built on the islands of Pemba, Zanzibar, Mafia and Kilwa (Map 10.3).

Of all the new Swahili towns, Kilwa was destined to become the most important. Until this time, the gold trade, such as it was, had been largely organised by the Muslim merchants of Mogadishu, the northernmost Swahili town, founded in about 1000 CE. Through their Muslim contacts along the coast, the Mogadishu merchants arranged for gold dust to be brought north from the ‘land of Sofala’ far to the south. The new Shirazi rulers of Kilwa were now in a position to break Mogadishu’s control of the gold trade. Kilwa was the most southerly point to which overseas merchants could sail in one season. It was therefore ideally placed to control the southern trade. The merchants of Kilwa sent ships south to form a small trading settlement at Sofala, just south of modern Beira (Map 10.3). Here, the peoples of the interior brought gold from the emerging societies of the Limpopo valley and the Zimbabwe plateau. By the thirteenth century at the latest, Kilwa had broken the hold of Mogadishu and established local control of the overseas trade in the gold of southern Africa. For the next 200 years, Kilwa remained one of the most important and perhaps the wealthiest of all the Swahili trading towns.

Indian Ocean trading networks, tenth to sixteenth centuries



The political economy of the Swahili trading towns

There were, in all, some 40 Swahili towns between Mogadishu and Sofala. Many were small, containing only a few stone houses, a mosque, a Muslim ruling family and a predominantly non-Muslim subject population. The larger towns such as Mogadishu, Pate, Mombasa, Malindi, Zanzibar and Kilwa were built almost entirely of coral stone and showed signs of great wealth.

Most of the towns acted independently, under the rule of their own Muslim sultan. At various times, though, some of the larger towns exercised authority over their smaller neighbours. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, for instance, the sultans of Kilwa claimed control over much of the coast between Sofala and Zanzibar. But their hold was weakened by a series of dynastic disputes, and by the 1490s, most of the towns, including Sofala, were asserting their independence.

The ruling classes were mostly very wealthy. They lived in large stone houses and ornate palaces. They wore fine robes of silk and cotton, and jewellery made of gold and silver. They ate off delicate imported porcelain from Persia and China. Although they owned large estates on which were grown millet, cotton, vegetables and fruit, their main source of wealth was the overseas trade. The sultan charged import and export dues of up to 50 per cent and more on all goods passing through the town. In spite of these heavy taxes, the merchants

of the towns were able to grow wealthy on their trade. In some of the larger towns such as Kilwa and Mombasa, the merchants also organised the production of cotton cloth, and glass and shell beads for trading in the African interior.

Figure 10.3 The ruins of the Great Mosque at Kilwa, founded in the thirteenth century and much extended in the fifteenth. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Source: Werner Forman archive/Getty Images.

In the larger towns, the bulk of the townspeople were Kiswahili-speaking Muslim craftsmen, artisans, clerks, minor court officials and captains of coastal ships. This part of the population was distinctly African in personnel, with no claim to Arab or Persian ancestry. They tended to live in rectangular mud and thatch houses clustered within or around the edge of the main stone town. Traditional African villages on the adjacent mainland housed non-Muslim farmers and

fishers who provided the town with regular food, and visiting ivory hunters and traders from the interior usually stayed there.

Relations between the peoples of the mainland and the Swahili of the coastal and island towns varied considerably. In general, it was in the interests of both to maintain good relations. The peoples of the interior supplied the Swahili with the ivory, furs and gold so essential to their trade and continued wealth. In return, the Swahili supplied them with cloth, beads, imported pottery and other luxuries.

At times, however, relations were not so good and mainland chieftains were known to attack or besiege coastal towns. The main cause of friction, though, was raids by the Swahili themselves into the interior in search of livestock and other booty, and captives to enslave. At the time of Ibn Battuta's visit in 1331, the sultan of Kilwa was conducting what he claimed was a jihad against the 'pagan Zanj' of the interior. The nature of his 'holy war' is revealed by Ibn Battuta's comment that the sultan 'frequently makes raids into the Zanj country, attacks them and carries off booty'. Some of this he kept for himself, the rest he put into a special fund for entertaining foreign visitors, such as Ibn Battuta himself. The sultan was surnamed Abu al-Mawahib ('the Father of Gifts') 'on account of his numerous charitable gifts'.²

The sultans of Kilwa, who got much of their wealth from the gold trade of Sofala far to the south, could perhaps afford to antagonise the local mainland peoples in this way. Later sultans of Kilwa re-established better relations with the mainland peoples, however. It is interesting to note that when the Portuguese attacked Kilwa in 1505, the local African chief sent archers across from the mainland to help defend the island.

Relations between the Swahili towns themselves were generally peaceable. There was great rivalry between them over trade, but they seldom attacked each other, and the violence of piracy was almost unknown before the coming of the Portuguese.

The Portuguese on the east African coast, 1498–1600

When the Portuguese rounded the southern tip of Africa and sailed north along the east African coast in 1498, they were the first western Europeans to enter the Indian Ocean from the south. Portuguese trading ships had for some years been sailing ever further south along the west coast of Africa in search of an eastern route to India. The motives behind these early European ventures will be considered further in [Chapter 18](#). Essentially, they hoped that by entering the

Indian Ocean from the south, they could bypass their Muslim rivals who dominated north Africa and the eastern Mediterranean world of western Asia. In this way, the Portuguese hoped to seize from Muslim control the fabulously wealthy trade in the spices, perfumes, silks and other luxuries of India. They knew little if anything of the existence of the east African Swahili trade.

When the Portuguese saw the wealth of the Swahili towns and the extent of their trade, they determined to seize control of it too, if necessary by force. The tactic they adopted was to sail with heavily armed ships into the harbours of the more important towns. They then demanded that the ruler of the town become a Portuguese subject and pay a heavy annual tribute to the king of Portugal. If these demands were not met, the town was attacked, all its possessions were seized and any Muslims who resisted were killed. The whole process was justified in the name of a 'holy Christian war' against the 'Moors'.

The term 'Moor' originated in medieval Christian Spain and Portugal to refer to those Muslim Berbers who had invaded Spain in the eighth century from Mauretania (the Roman name for what is today Morocco). By the fifteenth century, it was being used by European Christians to refer specifically to the Muslims of north Africa, but they also used it more generally to refer to all Muslims, whether African or Arab.

Even the larger island towns had not been used to defending themselves against determined attack from the sea. And they were so used to being rivals in trade that, in their time of need, the Swahili towns failed to act together against the new threat from outside.

The sultan of Malindi hoped to avoid confrontation by quickly agreeing to pay tribute to the Portuguese. But the majority of coastal towns refused to surrender their independence so easily. Indeed, the sultan of Mombasa went so far as to declare war on Malindi, who had now apparently become an ally of the common enemy.

Figure 10.4 Portuguese ships of the sixteenth century. Note the cannon protruding from the side and rear of the ship.



Source: DEA/A. Dagliorti/Getty Images.

Swahili towns and the Portuguese, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries



Zanzibar was the first Swahili town to come under serious Portuguese attack. In 1503, Ruy Lourenço Ravasco, a Portuguese sea captain, blasted at the townspeople with his ship's cannon until the sultan of Zanzibar agreed to pay an annual tribute of 100 mithqals in gold (the equivalent of 425 grams). The attack was, in fact, little more than a piratical raid launched on the initiative of one Portuguese captain. But it set the pattern for things to come. During 1503, Ravasco and his companions sailed up and down the Swahili coast, seizing ships and ransoming them for payment in gold. This was

followed in 1505 by a more determined and official Portuguese assault. Francisco d'Almeida, a Portuguese nobleman, soldier and explorer, was sent with a fleet of 11 heavily armed ships to seize control of the more important towns. That year, Kilwa, Mombasa and Barawa were each attacked. The following Portuguese eyewitness accounts describe the sacking of Kilwa and Mombasa:

From our ships the fine houses, terraces, and minarets, with the palms and trees in the orchards, made the city [Kilwa] look so beautiful that our men were eager to land and overcome the pride of this barbarian, who spent all that night in bringing into the island archers from the mainland ...

[After some hand-to-hand fighting, the following day the sultan fled and the Portuguese took the town.]

Then the Vicar-General and some of the Franciscan fathers came ashore carrying two crosses in procession and singing the Te Deum. They went to the palace, and there the cross was put down and the Grand-Captain [d'Almeida] prayed. Then everyone started to plunder the town of all its merchandise and provisions ...

[After two weeks spent securing the town, building a fortress and appointing a new 'puppet' sultan, the Portuguese fleet sailed up the coast to Mombasa.]

The Moors of Mombasa had built a strongpoint with many guns at the entrance of the harbour, which is very narrow. When we entered, the first ship was fired on by the Moors from both sides. We promptly replied to the fire, and with such intensity that the gunpowder in their strongpoint caught fire. It started burning and the Moors fled, thus allowing the whole fleet to enter and lie at anchor in front of the town ...

The Grand-Captain met with the other captains and decided to burn the town that evening and to enter it the following morning. But when they went to burn the town they were received by the Moors with a shower of arrows and stones. The town has more than 600 houses which are thatched with palm leaves ... In between the stone dwelling-houses there are wooden houses with porches and stables for cattle. Once the fire was started it raged all night long ... from this town trade is carried on with Sofala and with Cambay [in western India] by sea. There were three ships from Cambay and even these did not escape the fury of the attack. [Early the following morning the Portuguese stormed ashore.] The

archers and gunners went ahead of everyone else ... Further on they found three-storeyed houses from which stones were thrown at them. But the stones which were thrown fell against the walls of the very narrow streets, so that much of the force of their fall was lost. There were also many balconies projecting over the streets under which one could shelter. The Grand-Captain went straight to the royal palace where Captain Vermudez climbed up the wall and hoisted our flag, shouting: Portugal, Portugal. [Only four Portuguese were killed in the attack on Mombasa, but] ... the death of these four was avenged by that of 1513 Moors ...

The Grand-Captain ordered that the town should be sacked and that each man should carry off to his ship whatever he found ... each man to receive a twentieth of what he found ... everyone started to plunder the town ... There was a large quantity of cotton cloth for Sofala in the town, for the whole coast gets its cotton cloth from here. So the Grand-Captain got a good share of the trade of Sofala for himself. A large quantity of rich silk and gold embroidered clothes was seized, and carpets also; one of these, which was without equal for beauty, was sent to the King of Portugal together with many other valuables.³

D'Almeida went on to become governor of Goa, a small Portuguese colony on the west coast of India. He met his death at the hands of the Khoesan of southern Africa, whom he unwisely attacked during his return voyage to Portugal in 1509.

Figure 10.5 View of an archway from the fifteenth-century ruined city of Gedi, near Malindi on the east African coast. There are few references to Gedi in the literature, and how and why it came to be ruined and abandoned is not known.



Source: AlexanderXXI/iStock.

After sacking the Swahili towns that resisted them, the Portuguese erected stone fortresses in the southern ports of Kilwa (see [Figure 10.6](#)), Mozambique and Sofala. This provided them with a firm base on the African coast from which to sail across to their Indian colony of Goa. As noted in [Chapter 9](#), this also gave them coastal control of the gold trade that reached Sofala from the Zimbabwe plateau.

The Portuguese hoped that their southern trading bases would also divert trade away from the northern Swahili towns. But Swahili resistance continued in the north. The sultan of Mombasa refused to pay tribute to the Portuguese and continued to maintain direct trading contacts with Arabia and the Persian Gulf. As a result of this defiance, Mombasa suffered two further Portuguese sackings, in 1528 and 1589. After the third and final sacking of Mombasa, the Portuguese realised that to dominate the trade of the western Indian Ocean, they needed to control the northern cities as well. In order to do this, they built a huge fortress at Mombasa, which they called Fort Jesus. Completed in 1599, Fort Jesus became the main centre of Portuguese authority in eastern Africa for the next 100 years. Its massive threatening walls (see [Figure 10.7](#)) aptly symbolised the violence with which Portuguese domination of the trade of the east African coast was maintained for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Figure 10.6 A view of the remains of the sixteenth-century Portuguese



Source: Werner Forman/Getty Images.

Madagascar

The huge island of Madagascar, which lies approximately 500 kilometres off the Mozambique coast of east Africa, was uninhabited until the early centuries of the Common Era. This long, north–south oriented island is dominated by a central plateau that has a fairly temperate climate, but not very fertile soil. To the east of the plateau is a narrow coastal strip that was, in the past, covered with thick tropical forest. On the west is a wider coastal plain, of mixed tropical vegetation in the north and drier, almost desert conditions in the south.

The people of Madagascar are collectively known as Malagasy. The island was first settled by people of Austronesian origin (people of the Malaysian/Indonesian/Australian/Polynesian group) and Bantu speakers from the east African mainland, both of whom appear to have arrived at approximately the same time. Austronesians crossed the Indian Ocean in outrigger canoes to the east coast of Africa where they made no permanent settlement, but where they came into contact with Bantu-speaking farmers. It has traditionally been believed that it was contacts such as these which brought the banana

to east Africa. The banana and the coconut, however, were well established along the coast in the early centuries CE and may have been brought in in earlier centuries via India. The Austronesians then settled on the northern coast of Madagascar, accompanied by Bantu-speaking east Africans, possibly as some form of servile labour. Linguistic evidence puts these events between about 100 and 400 CE, although the earliest direct archaeological evidence of Madagascan settlement that has been found so far is dated to the eighth century. In subsequent centuries, other east African Bantu speakers followed and some established independent settlements in the western and southern parts of the island. Further occasional new arrivals of small numbers of Austronesians occurred until possibly as late as 1500 CE. Most early settlement was confined to the coastal lowlands. The interior plateau remained sparsely populated until later centuries.

Besides an obvious expertise in fishing, the Malagasy's Austronesian ancestors brought with them the cultivation of rice and bananas and a tradition of building rectangular houses; their African ancestors brought cattle and other farming practices. However, Indian Ocean trade also constituted an important sector of the Malagasy economy. Following the expansion of Muslim-led east African coastal trade from the seventh century, northern Madagascar became part of the Swahili trading network. By 1000 CE, small numbers of traders of Swahili, Arab and Indian ancestry were settled in the northern trading ports. The Arabic-speaking traders, known locally as Antalaotra, brought with them an ideology of kingship, and established ruling dynasties among the peoples of the north and west of the island. Along the east coast, which was relatively cut off from the trading networks of the western Indian Ocean, Austronesian contacts were maintained, and although some Antalaotra élites settled in this region, they adopted the dominant Malagasy language and culture. In the isolated valleys of the south, where concepts of kingship also took hold, Bantu languages were retained until at least the fourteenth century.

Figure 10.7 Fort Jesus, Mombasa, the Portuguese headquarters on the northern east African coast, designed to impress with its massive strength.



Source: Robert_Ford/iStock.



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SECTION 5



WEST AFRICA IN THE ERA OF THE SLAVE TRADE



The dominant themes of Chapters 11 and 12 are slavery and the slave trade, and the not unrelated rise of violence and dominant states in tropical west Africa.

While some form of slave or servile labour had long been a feature of west African societies, and transportation of captives across the Sahara had a long history, the European-initiated transatlantic slave trade developed on such a large scale across three centuries that it left an indelible imprint, not only on the continent of Africa, but also on the Americas and the Caribbean.

The European role in this notorious trade is examined here alongside the African dimension, the latter including the level of African initiative in responding to, directing and promoting this trade in human beings. Gilbert and Reynolds have referred to 'the coercive nature of the new global economy' that European shipping brought to west Africa from the sixteenth century. This made it virtually impossible for west Africans to deal with that global environment without participating in some manner or other with the all-pervasive transatlantic slave trade.¹ Among Africans dealing in this commercial intercourse, there was not yet a concept of being black and African, as opposed to being white and European. African perceptions of identity were based on existing African nations and ethnicities. Many

Europeans arriving in west African waters were viewed as trading partners, while some African nations were regarded as dangerous enemies. Hostility to 'the other' and looking down on subservient populations long predate the slave trade, but the emergence of the specific racism of white against black can fairly be dated to this 300-year period. The importance of African witnesses to the iniquity and racism of the slave trade is highlighted through the autobiography of Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano).

It was a time of heightened levels of violence and the rise of dominant conquest states within the west African region – Benin, Oyo, Dahomey, Borno, Asante – with small-scale communities often the target of state expansion, much of it related to the trade in slaves. Religion as a source of state power receded as economic and military might took centre stage, although rulers in states such as Dahomey and Asante developed a cult of kingship to enhance their royal status. By the eighteenth century, guns had become a regular import from the Atlantic coast, while savannah states also imported horses for military use from across the Sahara. The use of either or both of these instruments of warfare enabled the rise of standing armies as a means of state expansion.

In spite of this and the incentive to obtain slaves through warfare as European demand at the coast peaked in the late eighteenth century, not all economic activity was directed to satisfy the slave trade. All the powerful states had sound economic bases in food production and craft industry. In particular, the city-based states of the Hausa developed craft specialisations that fed into wide international trading networks, while artistic and technical skills in the forest states built on a long tradition that traced its origin back to Early Iron Age times.

While some states, through abuses of power, ended the eighteenth century in a condition ripe for revolution, others saw it out still strong enough to meet the unique challenges of the century to come.

CHAPTER 11

The Atlantic slave trade, sixteenth to eighteenth century

Slavery in Africa before the Atlantic trade

Slavery, and the trading in captives for sale into slavery, has a long history in Africa, as well as in Europe and Asia. In ancient pharaonic times, captives from Nubia were transported down the Nile to Egypt. Some were also transported across the Sahara from western to northern Africa in Roman times, while others were sent out of northeast Africa to labour in the states of the Persian Gulf and India. The Atlantic trade of later centuries, however, was to surpass all these in sheer scale and systematic organisation.

The trans-Saharan slave trade

Slave labour was used in the mid-Saharan salt mines from ancient times, but the scale of this increased dramatically with the expansion of trans-Saharan trade that coincided with the Muslim penetration of north Africa and the growth in the empire of Ghana. Islamic law did not allow the enslavement of fellow Muslims, so north African merchants sought their slaves from non-Muslim societies south of the Sahara. Consequently, the transportation of captives for sale into slavery in north Africa became a regular, if initially small, part of expanding trans-Saharan trade networks from the eighth century. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that, over the next 11 centuries, as many as 5 million Africans were transported across the Sahara to be sold into slavery. And over a similar period, up to 2.5 million people were transported from east and northeast Africa into slavery in western Asia.

Slavery in the Muslim world was not plantation slavery, such as was to become common in the Americas. Male slaves were often incorporated into armies and through this, and their conversion to Islam, they became an integral part of Muslim north Africa: some former slaves rose to high office. Female slaves, for whom there was a high demand, became household servants or concubines and were to be found right across the Muslim world of north Africa and western Asia.

Some form of slavery or subservient labour had long been a part of African society south of the Sahara. Often originating as war captives, in larger centralised states they were often thoroughly incorporated into the economy and society, almost as a way of strengthening and expanding the state. In small, decentralised communities, they tended to be treated more as outsiders and, on occasion, were ransomed back

to their original homes. Slaves were sometimes sold in the markets of large and small communities, but this was not a regular feature and their capture was not primarily undertaken with intent to sell. Increasingly, however, from the eleventh century, as the rulers of states on the southern fringes of the Sahara converted to Islam, their armies raided their non-Muslim neighbours to obtain captives for the trans-Saharan trade. This trade in human beings continued until at least the end of the nineteenth century, with some reports of it occurring well into the twentieth century. In all, it lasted some 1,500 years, but it was never on the massive scale that Europeans were to initiate for the transatlantic trade.

The origins of European maritime trade with west Africa

The aims of Portuguese initiatives

When the Portuguese first sailed out on their voyages of exploration along the west African coast, the desire to reach India was a distant objective. Of more immediate concern was their attempt to bypass Muslim north Africa and gain direct access to the gold-producing regions of west Africa. This would provide the poorly endowed state of Portugal with a major source of national wealth, for sub-Saharan west Africa was known to be the main source of gold for the coinage of western Europe (see [Figure 7.3](#), a fourteenth-century European map of Africa, showing Mali as a major source of gold). Once access to this had been achieved, the wealth it provided could finance further exploration round the southern tip of Africa and on to India. Ultimately, by reaching India via a southern route, the Portuguese would be bypassing the Muslim-controlled trading routes of western Asia. In doing so, they hoped to reap rich rewards from the Indian trade in spices, perfumes, silks and other luxuries.

Early Portuguese trade on the west African coast

Portuguese sailing ships first reached the west African coast south of the Akan goldfields in the 1470s. They built a fort there, known as Elmina ('the mine'), to protect their trading post from rival European shipping (see [Figures 11.1](#) and [11.2](#)). At first, the Portuguese traded copper, brass and European cloth in exchange for gold. They thus offered the forest peoples goods they had previously obtained from Songhay and the trans-Saharan trade. The Portuguese also sold them a certain number of slaves brought from the forest kingdom of Benin near the Niger Delta. It appears that for some time slave labour had

been used to run the gold mines of the Akan forest region. In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese added cowrie shells and luxury cloths from the Indian Ocean trade to the range of goods they offered in exchange for west African gold. These cowrie shells quickly became a regular trading currency in west Africa. It was not long before half the produce of the Akan goldfields was being diverted southwards, away from Songhay and the trans-Saharan trade, and towards European trading forts along the coast.

The origins of European-controlled plantation slavery

Meanwhile, in the 1480s, the Portuguese had discovered in the Gulf of Guinea the uninhabited equatorial islands of Príncipe and São Tomé. In the years that followed, Portuguese settlers developed thriving sugar plantations in the rich volcanic soils of these islands, manning their plantations with slave labour from the African mainland.

The plantation system for growing sugar cane had originally been developed in various Mediterranean islands and southern Spain and Portugal during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The slave labour for these plantations was drawn not only from north Africa but also from among the Slavs of southern Russia. Indeed, the European word ‘slave’ comes from the use of Slavs for this kind of unpaid labour. As the Portuguese captured Atlantic islands from Madeira southwards to São Tomé, they extended to the tropics their plantation system for growing sugar.

In the early sixteenth century, São Tomé became the largest single producer of sugar for the European market. Ultimately, the São Tomé plantation system, owned and run by European overseers and manned by African slave labour, was to become the model for plantation slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Figure 11.1 Elmina Castle, Ghana was built by the Portuguese in 1482 and used by them and later by Dutch and English traders as a base for dealing in slaves, gold and imported European products. Castles such as these were originally built to prevent rival Europeans from trading in that particular region, and to imprison slaves awaiting shipment across the Atlantic.



Source: demerzel21/iStock.

Figure 11.2 Inside the ramparts of Elmina Castle looking towards the market chamber where slaves were sold.



Source: mtcurado/iStock.

West Africa: Portuguese exploration and trade in the fifteenth century



Origins and development of the transatlantic slave trade

From early on in the Portuguese presence along the coast of tropical west Africa, captives were bought from local chiefdoms for sale into slavery. Initially, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they came largely from the Senegal and Gambia region and were transported to the farms and plantations of southern Spain and Portugal. Those taken from the Niger Delta and the Congo River region went mostly to the island of São Tomé.

Meanwhile, Columbus's pioneering transatlantic voyage of 1492 had revealed a tropical 'New World' that Europeans, led by the Spaniards, were quick to colonise and exploit.

These European colonisers soon realised the need for a large imported labour force to work the gold and silver mines of the mainland and their tobacco plantations on the Caribbean islands. The local indigenous Amerindian population quickly succumbed to harsh treatment from the colonisers and to unfamiliar European diseases. By the end of the first century of European contact, 90 per cent or more

of the Amerindian population of the Caribbean islands had been wiped out – victims of European violence or disease. Criminals and outcasts from Europe were transported to the Americas in the early sixteenth century, but their numbers were limited, and most did not long survive attacks of tropical disease. Faced with these problems, the European colonisers of central and south America turned to Africa for their labour force.

Africans had developed a certain level of immunity to some tropical diseases. They were known to have experience and skills in metalworking, mining and tropical agriculture. Portuguese experience had already shown that there was always somewhere along the west African coast where African rulers were prepared to sell their war captives and criminals. And the example of São Tomé had shown the possibilities of using African slave labour on plantations.

The first African captives to be taken directly across the Atlantic and sold into slavery were transported in 1532. Thereafter, a steady transatlantic trade in human cargo developed, although annual numbers remained relatively small for the first 100 years. But from the 1630s, as first the Dutch and then the French and the English became involved, there was a rapid expansion of sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean. Demand for slave labour increased and the scale of the trade in captives from west Africa reached epic proportions. There developed over the next 200 years the largest forced transportation of captive people ever devised in human history.

The nature of the slave trade

The evidence

Any west African records that may have been kept by literate coastal slave traders do not seem to have survived, but numerous ships' logs and cargo manifests (see [Figure 11.3](#)) are to be found in various archives in Europe and America. Dedicated researchers have also found numerous records of slave auctions as well as plantation record books in the Americas and the Caribbean.

First-hand evidence of the African perspective, however, had to await the publication of the personal experiences of former slaves in the late eighteenth century. The best known of these is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, also known in his lifetime as Gustavus Vassa. His *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* was first published in English in Great Britain in 1789. It ran to nine editions in his lifetime (with several modern editions still in print). At the time,

the book was an important stimulus to the campaign to abolish the slave trade (see [Chapter 17](#)). Vassa, as he apparently preferred to be known, traced his origins in the mid-eighteenth century to the land of the Igbo in what is today southeastern Nigeria. He relates the story of his capture, his transportation to the coast and his incarceration on a slaving ship for the transatlantic passage to America. The book continues with his experience as a personal slave aboard various ships plying the routes between South Carolina, Georgia and the Caribbean, his education in England and his eventual purchase of his own liberty. The book concludes with his life as a freeman: sailor, adventurer and business partner.

The recent discovery of a South Carolinian baptismal record has led some scholars to doubt the story of Vassa's African birth; but this revisionism has itself been challenged, some casting doubt on the weight given to the baptismal record, while others have pointed to the accuracy of the contemporary Igbo detail, which most likely could only have been known by someone with direct experience of it. Whatever the truth of these questions, most scholars accept the basic truth of his related experience. Certainly, his evidence and that of others like him in this period is widely accepted as direct evidence of the African experience of the slave trade and slavery in the New World. In particular, Vassa's evidence brought to wide public attention the full horrors of the so-called 'Middle Passage' across the Atlantic.



For more analysis of the evidence around Vassa's story and the conflicting interpretations of it, see 'Gustavus Vassa' on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

Figure 11.3 Slave cargo manifest 'of NEGROES, MULATTOS and PERSONS OF COLOR', on board the *D.C. Wilson* on entering the port of Mobile, Alabama, October 1844. This record notes the name, age, sex and owner for said slaves.

MANIFEST of NEGROES, MULATTOS, and PERSONS OF COLOR, taken on board the schooner D. G. Nelson
 at 70 Bayou in Matter, barthen 98 tone, to be transported to the port of Mobile is the district of
 Alabama for the purpose of being sold or disposed of as slaves, or to be held to service or labor.

NUMBER OF ENTRY.	NAMES.	SEX.		AGE.	HEIGHT.		Whether Negro, Mulatto, or Person of Color.	OWNER OR SHIPPER'S	
		MALE.	FEMALE.		FEET.	INCHES.		NAME.	RESIDENCE.
1	Charles	"	"	21	5	11	Black	W. C. Campbell	Baltimore
2	Henry Brown	"	"	24	5	11	Mulatto	"	"
3	Robert Clark	"	"	30	5	8	Black	"	"
4	Henry Henry	"	"	18	5	4	"	"	"
5	Alphon	"	"	8	3	7	"	"	"
6	Louisa +	"	"	23	5	6 1/2	"	"	"
7	Child	"	"	1 1/2	"	"	"	"	"
8	Mary Ann	"	"	28	5	3	"	"	"
9	Mary Ann	"	"	35	5	3	"	"	"
10	Henry	"	"	17	5	2	"	"	"
11	Dorothy Ballou	"	"	23	5	3	"	"	"
12	Mary Anne	"	"	17	5	2	"	"	"
13	Elizabeth	"	"	13	4	7	"	"	"
14	Barak	"	"	11	4	6	Mulatto	"	"
15	Louisa	"	"	7	3	8	Black	"	"
16	John Thomas	"	"	20	5	6	"	W. C. Campbell	Alabama
17	Isabella Thomas	"	"	13	4	7	"	"	"
18	Henry	"	"	18	5	4	"	"	"
19	Elizabeth	"	"	23	5	3	"	"	"
20	John Henry	"	"	4	3	"	"	"	"
21	Arny	"	"	14	5	"	"	"	"
22	Ann	"	"	11	4	5	"	"	"
23	Mamuel Lewis	"	"	23	5	6	"	W. C. Campbell	Georgia
24	Peter	"	"	18	5	1 1/2	"	"	"
25	Henry	"	"	17	5	4	"	"	"
26	Abel	"	"	24	5	6	"	"	"
27	Charles & Child	"	"	23	5	2	"	"	"
28	Arny	"	"	4	3	3	"	"	"
29	Rebecca	"	"	38	5	2	"	"	"
30	Barak	"	"	34	5	"	"	"	"
31	Ann	"	"	16	4	10	"	"	"
32	Maria Child	"	"	22	4	7	"	"	"
33	Harriet	"	"	11	4	4	"	"	"
34	Rebecca	"	"	16	4	3	"	"	"
35	Mary	"	"	16	4	3	Mulatto	"	"
36	Rebecca	"	"	16	3	2	Mulatto	W. C. Campbell	Alabama

District of Baltimore, Port of Baltimore, 30 day of October 1864
 I, Wm. Campbell, a shipper of the person named, and particularly described in the above manifest of slaves and
 at 70 Bayou in Matter of the schooner D. G. Nelson do solemnly swear, each of us to the best of our knowledge and belief
 that the above manifest is true and correct, and that under the Laws of the State of Maryland no
 person named, or particularly described in the above manifest, has been or is being held to service or labor as
 a slave, or to be held to service or labor as a slave, or to be held to service

Source: Reproduced with permission from Collector of Customs, Collection District of Mobile, Alabama; Records of the US Customs Service, Record Group 36; National Archives at Atlanta.

The question of scale

Over recent years, there has been considerable dispute among historians about the numbers involved in the transatlantic trade. Recorded statistics show that at least 10 million Africans were landed alive and sold into slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean in the 300 years that followed 1532. Allowing for a further 2 million to have died on the transatlantic voyage (a conservative estimate), a total of at

least 12 million people were taken captive out of Africa. Numbers that stood at only a few thousand a year in the sixteenth century rose to an average of 20,000 a year in the seventeenth and further rocketed to between 50,000 and 100,000 a year for much of the eighteenth century. Numbers tailed off during the nineteenth century, but the trade did not altogether cease until the 1870s and 80s. Some historians argue that a huge amount of traffic went unrecorded and that the real scale of the trade was double the amount indicated here.



Controversy still surrounds the true numbers of people that suffered under the Atlantic slave trade and the methodology behind how the varying suggested figures were arrived at. We address this debate in more detail in ‘The Scale of the Atlantic Slave Trade’ on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

The African dimension

Although the numbers of slaves taken out of Africa were clearly huge, they varied widely from one region to another. In the sixteenth century, Senegal was an important early source of slaves. The Angolan coastline was unusual in that it remained a major slave-exporting region for most of the period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The effects of this on the peoples of Angola will be discussed further in [Chapter 14](#).

With the rise of Caribbean sugar plantations from the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch, French, English, Danes and other Europeans became more actively involved in the carrying trade. Then, the so-called ‘Slave Coast’ (the western coast of modern Nigeria) became a major source of slaves. With the rapid expansion of slave exports in the eighteenth century, virtually every part of the Atlantic coastline from Senegal to southern Angola became involved in the human traffic. The greatest concentration of European trading forts was along the so-called ‘Gold Coast’, the coastline of the modern state of Ghana. Slaves continued to be taken from the ‘Slave Coast’ and Angola until well into the nineteenth century when many other regions had ceased their trade in people.

On the whole, European slave traders were not active in the business of capturing their victims. European traders did not have the military power to go on their own extensive raiding expeditions. In any case, why go on expensive raiding expeditions when captives could be bought more cheaply and with less risk at the coast? When they did enter the interior, as with the Portuguese in Angola, European armies either suffered military defeat or were weakened by disease. Nevertheless, in the Angolan case, they stirred up warfare within the Kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo, which provided ample numbers of captives for sale at the coast. European activity in the trade in Africans was usually restricted to their coastal trading forts. And they sought permission to build these from local African rulers to whom they were obliged to pay tribute. It is notable that the cannons on these fortresses are pointed out to sea, to deter European rivals, rather than inland at their local African allies. In general, it was African rulers who provided the captives, and specialist African and Afro-European slave dealers who conveyed them to the coast for sale.

The main source of people for sale into slavery was those captured in warfare, although by the eighteenth century, as evidenced by Gustavus Vassa, there had arisen a class of professional kidnappers who collected and traded their captives at the coast. As we have already noted, slavery and the sale of slaves had existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans on the west African coast. A major difference with the European-initiated trade, however, was that the war captives were being totally removed from their African societies, with a short life expectancy in harsh conditions and with no hope of return.

It used to be assumed that war captives offered for sale at the coast were the product of wars deliberately waged for this purpose. This undoubtedly did happen on occasion, especially in the eighteenth century when African traders raised the price demanded of Europeans at the coast. But research has revealed that there was considerably more local African initiative involved than was previously assumed to be the case.

A number of careful regional studies have revealed that the supply of captives at the coast was usually the result of specific local wars being waged in the interior. And the prime motive of these wars was the formation and expansion of states rather than simply a free for all, in which the losers ended up in slavery. Thus, the forest state of Benin sold captives to the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century while they were undergoing a period of military expansion. Significantly, in the sixteenth century, when they were no longer expanding against neighbouring enemies, they refused to trade any further in people.

The export of captives from Benin was only renewed in the eighteenth century as that formerly powerful kingdom went into decline. During the first half of the sixteenth century, the Mane, a branch of the Mande-speaking peoples, colonised the highlands of Sierra Leone, taking local people captive and selling them at the coast. In the early eighteenth century, the coastline of modern Guinea reached a peak of slave exports when the Muslim Fulbe of Futa Jalon created a new state and waged holy war against their neighbours. The result was a large number of captives for sale into slavery. Similarly, wars waged by the expanding states of Oyo, Dahomey and Asante (discussed in [Chapter 12](#)) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced specific local peaks in the supply of captives for sale to European slavers at the coast.

Basically, powerful African rulers provided captives when it suited them, and some of them became very rich in the process. But they rarely sold people from their own society, except unwanted criminals and outcasts. On the other hand, small societies, the weak states and 'stateless' village communities, the neighbours of the large expanding states, undoubtedly suffered greatly. Some disappeared altogether, their lands depopulated until they were taken over by other, more powerful neighbours.

Wars in the west African interior may not have generally been waged deliberately just to produce captives for sale. But the presence of Europeans on the coast offering what appeared to be high prices for captives undoubtedly stimulated warfare. This was especially so in the eighteenth century when Europeans offered guns as their major trading item.

Impact of the slave trade

As a result of the slave trade, there was an increased level of general warfare in the west African interior. It remains debateable as to whether there is a direct causative link between the slave trade and the underdevelopment of postcolonial Africa, as Walter Rodney (see box below) claimed. But, in purely economic terms, there was also an undeniable and immediate serious loss to the productive potential of the region. Previously, war had produced tribute from the vanquished, and captives to work for the victors. But now, the increased level of warfare produced a 'surplus' of captives. These were no longer kept, even as forced labour, within the African society that had captured them. They were no longer ransomed back to the society that had lost them. Instead, they were sold right out of Africa, and sold for goods worth a fraction of what those people might have produced within

their own lifetime. In addition, those sold were the young, most productive sector of the population, mostly aged between 12 and 35. It varied from one region to another, but all areas of western sub-Saharan Africa were seriously affected at some time or other during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has been estimated that between 1550 and 1850, the population level of western Africa, instead of doubling as would have been expected without the slave trade, remained approximately the same. This was a huge loss to productive capacity. At the same time, with west Africa's overseas trading system focused primarily on the export of its young, most productive men and women, the region received little productive stimulus from global trade.

Two positive imports into Africa from the New World were the food crops maize and cassava. Both had considerably higher calorific value than indigenous African millet and sorghum. Although cassava required high rainfall and tended to be confined to the forested zones, such as southeastern Nigeria, maize was widely adopted as a staple food crop wherever it was introduced in the moist savannah regions of Africa. Both crops would have been expected to produce overall population increase. That this failed to happen during this era is a further indictment on the iniquitous impact of the slave trade.

The ongoing legacy of the Atlantic slave trade

In his influential book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, first published in 1972, Guyanese historian Walter Rodney argued that Africa's chronic poverty and underdevelopment at the time of political independence in the mid-twentieth century was a direct result of European action in previous centuries. He argued that west Africans had reached a considerable level of economic and technical advancement up to the sixteenth century, but that, subsequently, indigenous technical innovation and economic development was stalled by the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, he went on to argue that the European slave trade out of Africa so weakened the continent that it left it open to Europe's mega-exploitation through colonisation in the nineteenth century and neocolonialism in the twentieth (see Chapters 22–26 and 30–31).

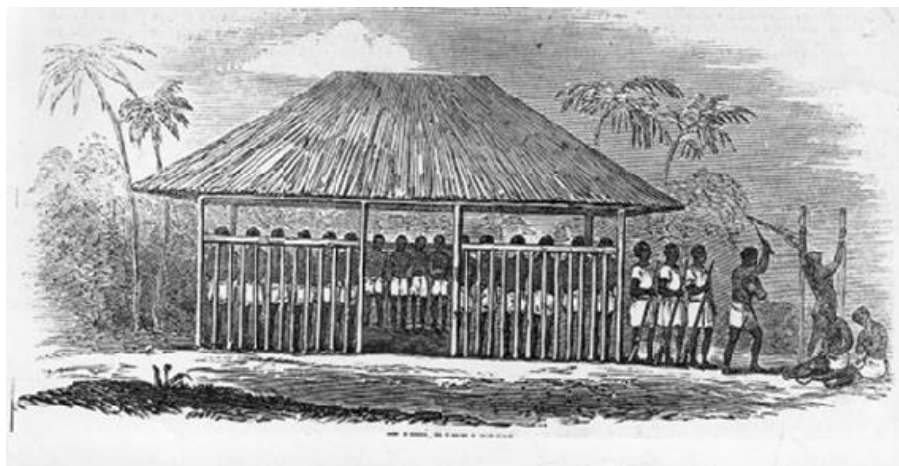
The transatlantic trade

Whatever its effect in terms of depopulating or distorting the

development of the continent, the greatest evil of the transatlantic trade in people was the extent of human suffering involved, and the callous disregard for human life and dignity displayed by those who dealt in slaves. When a person was captured in the interior and dispatched to the coast for sale, it marked the beginning of a short remaining life of appalling degradation and suffering. Captives were no longer treated as fellow human beings but rather as property, like domestic livestock, to be herded together, examined and bartered over.

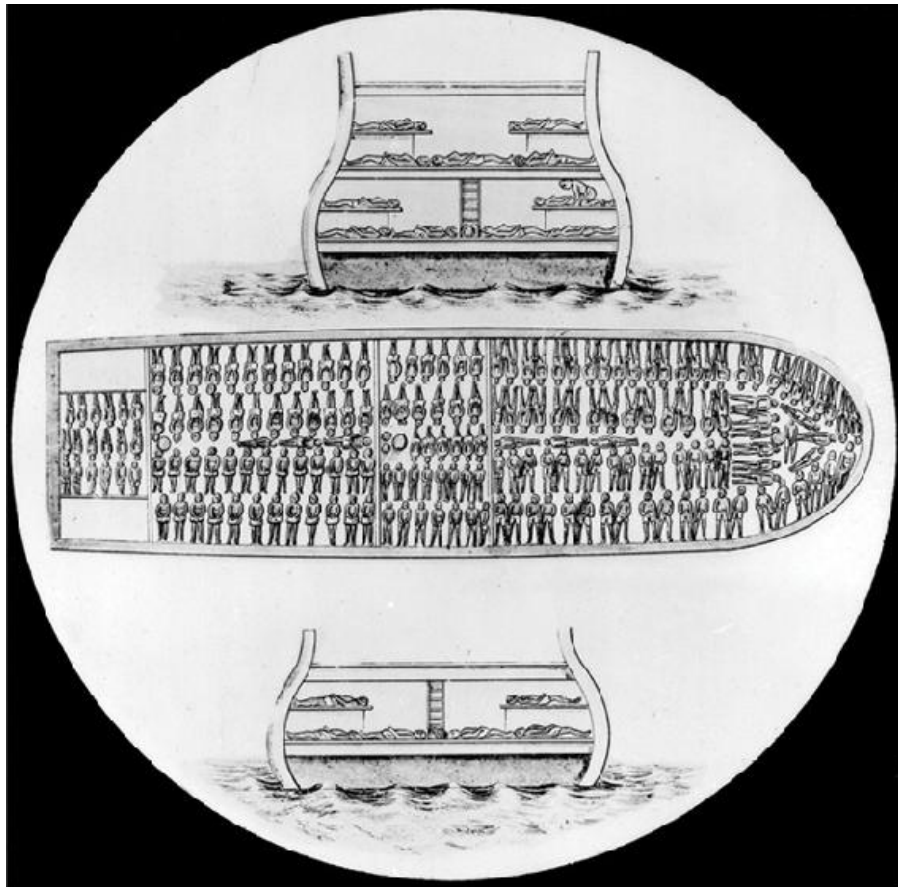
Captives were chained together and marched to the coast where they were locked up in wooden cages to await the arrival of the next European trading ship (Figure 11.4). They were then stripped naked, men and women together, and examined minutely to see if they were fit, strong and healthy. Once a deal had been struck between African middleman and European slave merchants, the most terrible part of their voyage began, referred to as the 'Middle Passage'. On board ship, they were chained together in rows and forced to lie on specially constructed 'decks', which were arranged like shelves barely half a metre one above the other (see Figure 11.5). This made it impossible for a person to sit up straight or to move freely. They lay like this for weeks on end, suffering in the stench of their own excreta and urine and given barely enough food and water to keep them alive. Those who died were simply thrown overboard. On average, between 15 and 30 per cent could be expected to die from disease, maltreatment or exhaustion during the three to six weeks of the transatlantic crossing. Ships' captains allowed for this loss by packing in more people. In this way, enough could be expected to survive the crossing for sale in America to make a handsome profit for the merchant who financed the voyage. On occasion, disease would spread so rapidly in the terrible conditions below decks that it wiped out a whole shipload of captives. But this kind of misfortune was rare and on the whole the trade in human cargo was a highly profitable concern for the shipping merchants. If it had not been, the trade would not have continued on such an ever-increasing scale. In this manner, tens of thousands of Africa's fittest young men and women were removed from the continent every year, all in the name of profit for European merchants and plantation owners.

Figure 11.4 Armed guards watching a slave being whipped outside a slave enclosure, c.1750. The captives in the cage are awaiting transportation.



Source: American School/Getty Images.

Figure 11.5 Diagram showing cross-sections of a transatlantic slave ship, c.1800. Illustrations such as this were published by anti-slave trade campaigners to show the true horrors of this human trafficking.



Source: Rischgitz/Stringer/Getty Images.

Plantations in the Americas and their demand for slave labour

The main plantations grew sugar and coffee in Brazil, sugar in the Caribbean islands and tobacco and cotton in the southern part of north America. The largest number of slaves were taken to the Caribbean islands.

For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number and size of plantations were constantly expanding. This meant an ever-greater demand for new slaves. Even on the long-established estates, there was a persistent demand for replacements. Life on the plantations of the New World was hard and short (see [Figure 11.6](#)). Some never survived the trauma and depression of leaving Africa and the transatlantic voyage. A third died within the first three years and few survived beyond ten years. The main causes of death were underfeeding and overwork.

Figure 11.6 Slaves working on a West Indian sugar plantation, c.1780. Note the overseer with whip in hand.



Source: Duncan 1890/iStock.

The economics of the plantation system was such that, until the end of the eighteenth century, it was cheaper to import fresh slaves from Africa than it was to allow them to rear their own children. A woman in childbirth could no longer labour effectively on the plantation, and a child had to be fed for a number of years before it

could be forced to work on the land. Thus, in the British colony of Jamaica, for example, 750,000 slave workers were imported from Africa over a period of some 200 years, and yet, at the time of emancipation in 1834, the population of Jamaica was only a third of a million.

The productive wealth of the New World rested very heavily on the shoulders of African labour. And those who profited most from this wealth were the merchants of Europe who financed the whole system.

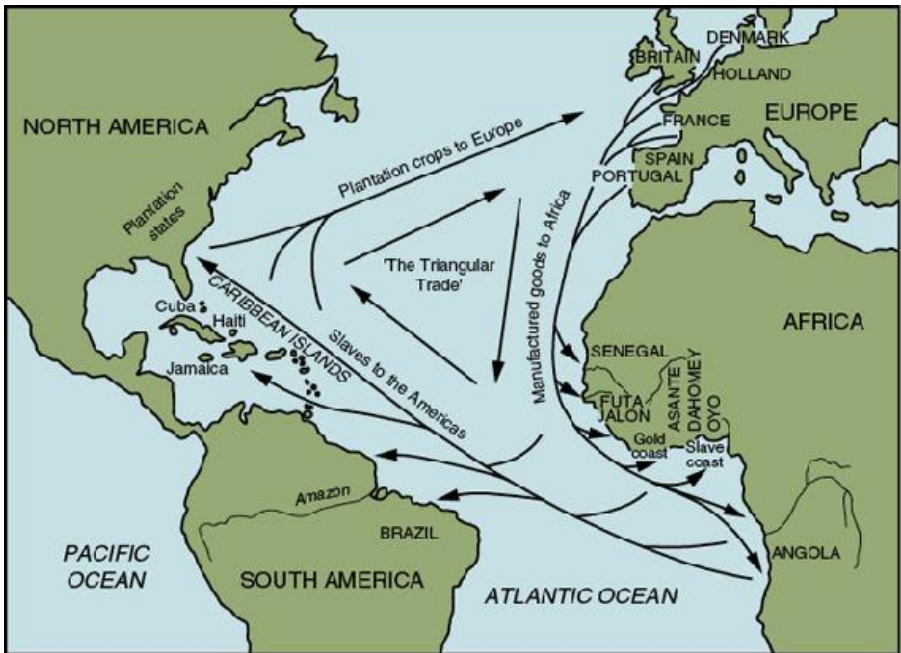
Profit from the slave trade: the European dimension

The 'triangular trade'

To European merchants involved in the slave trade, the export of Africans across the Atlantic was only one part of a wider trading system. A single ship setting out from Europe completed three main stages in its voyage, each with its own separate cargo, before finally returning to its home port in Europe. At each stage of this three-sided or 'triangular' trade, there was profit for the European merchant who financed the voyage. The first stage carried manufactured goods from Europe to Africa.

Significantly, the original Portuguese imports into Africa had included raw materials such as copper and other metals in exchange for gold. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this early pattern of trade had changed. Now, the principal European imports into Africa were cheap manufactured goods – mainly cotton cloth and metal hardware, especially guns – in exchange for slaves. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century, the special manufacture of cheap, substandard guns for the African market became an important source of profit for the new British industrial city of Birmingham. As dependence on European manufactured imports increased, further development of African craft industries declined. At the same time, as we have seen, the import of European guns made African warfare more effective and increased the supply of slaves. This ensured that the price of slaves exported from Africa remained fairly static for most of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was not until the 1780s that increasing European competition along the west African coast finally drove up the price of slaves. It was only then that European merchants began to question the trade's continued profitability.

The Atlantic slave trade, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries



In the second stage of the 'triangle', the slaves were transported across the Atlantic where they were sold for two or three times what they had cost on the African coast. Sometimes, they were sold for cash that was then used to buy plantation crops. At times, especially on the sugar-producing islands, slaves were directly bartered in exchange for sugar. In the third stage of this system, the products of slave labour were transported across the Atlantic to be sold in Europe.

Although risks were involved, as ships could be lost at sea, profits to the European merchants were generally huge. Profits from the 'triangular trade' largely accounted for the rising wealth of a number of major European port cities, such as Bristol and Liverpool in Britain, Bordeaux and Nantes in France, and Amsterdam in Holland. Merchants moved into banking and ultimately helped finance the capitalist factory system of the European Industrial Revolution. And, as European merchants were well aware at the time, the key to their source of Atlantic trading profits was the systematic exploitation of African slave labour.

Slavery and the origins of racism

It has been argued that the roots of European racism are to be found in the European exploitation of Africans through the transatlantic

slave trade and the plantation slavery of the New World. The deep roots of racism are probably more complex than this, although European enslavement of Africans undoubtedly played its part. In medieval Europe, Africans may have been regarded as curiosities, but not as inferior people. For the 300 years of the slave trade, however, Africans were viewed by Europeans almost exclusively as slaves, as though this was their natural state. Europeans argued that, in taking Africans out of their native continent, they were ‘rescuing’ them from a ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’ existence. It was a short step from this to arguing that Africans were naturally inferior. And when Europeans sought to colonise the African continent in the late nineteenth century, they used arguments such as these to justify their actions in the name of spreading Christianity and ‘civilisation’.



Visit the online resources at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/student-zone

- 1 Gilbert, E. and Reynolds, J.T. (2008) *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present*, 2nd edn (Pearson Education: Upper Saddle River, NJ), p. 184.

CHAPTER 12

West African states and societies, to the eighteenth century

The fall of the Songhay Empire

Songhay on the eve of the Moroccan invasion

The Empire of Songhay (see [Chapter 7](#)) had reached the height of its power in the early sixteenth century under the rule of Muhammad Ture. During his reign, Islam became more widely entrenched, trans-Saharan trade flourished and the Saharan salt mines of Taghaza were brought within the boundaries of the empire. During the course of the sixteenth century, however, this position of strength gradually declined. The power of the Askiya was weakened by a succession of short reigns and dynastic disputes, which erupted into full-blown civil war in the 1580s. At the same time, the general population and agricultural basis of the economy were weakened by drought and disease. There was a loosening of Songhay's control over long-distance trading networks. In the east, the growth of Hausa states, Borno and the Tuareg Sultanate of Aïr, was drawing trans-Saharan trade away from Songhay and the western routes. And from the south, the supply of gold declined as the chiefdoms of the Akan forest diverted some of their trade to the newly arrived European traders on the coast.

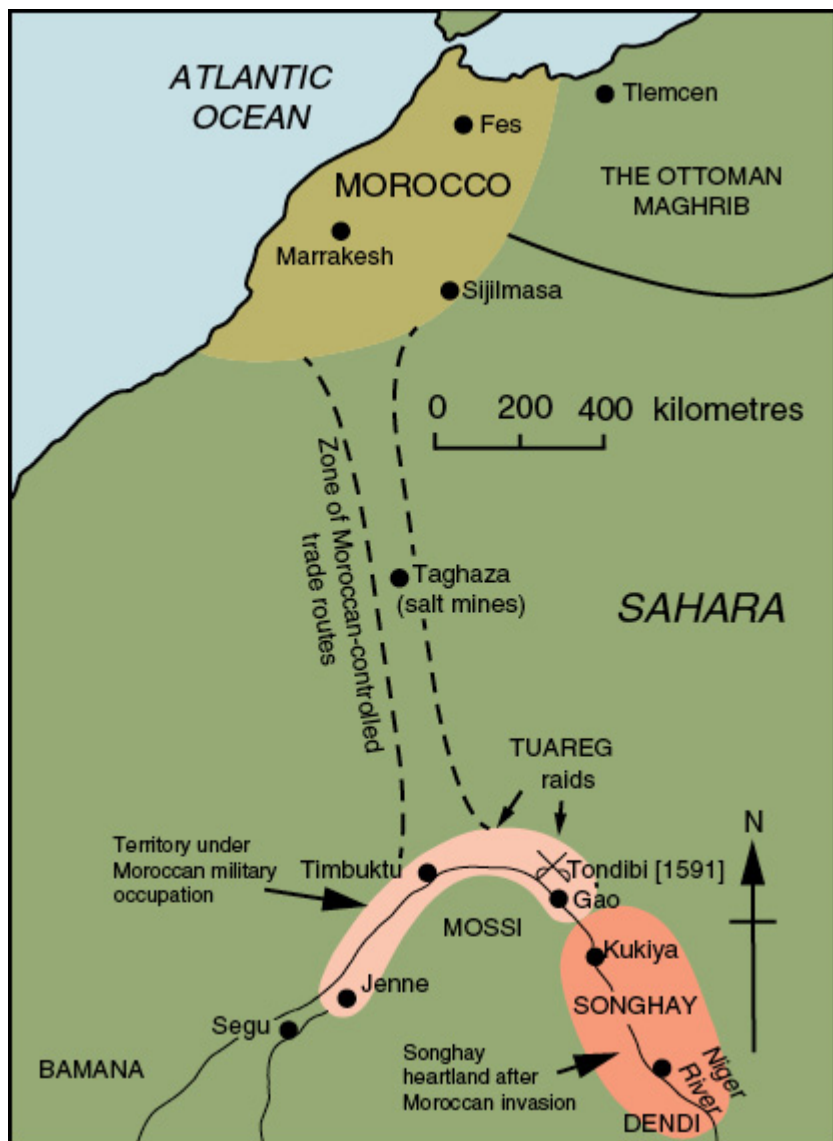
The weaknesses of Songhay, however, seem more critical with the historian's benefit of hindsight. At the time, despite the natural disasters of the 1580s, the empire appeared secure enough. Rival states might have drawn away some of Songhay's trade, but this was a gradual erosion that gave no immediate cause for alarm. With no great wars of conquest to finance, the rulers of Songhay had not unduly oppressed the peasantry to the point where they might revolt. And there had been no danger of external threat for the best part of a century. The Askias had seen no reason to 'modernise' their army with the importation of primitive and unreliable, European-

manufactured firearms. Their immediate neighbours to south, east and west were minor states. In the north, the Sahara continued to provide an apparently impenetrable barrier to the armies of the Ottomans and Moroccans of the Maghrib; impenetrable, that is, until the opening months of 1591.

The Moroccan invasion and the fall of Songhay

The main reason for the Moroccan invasion of Songhay was to seize control of and revive the trans-Saharan trade in gold. To this end, the Moroccan sultan, Ahmad al-Mansur, sent across the desert the cream of his army – a small but highly disciplined band of professional soldiers, a mixture of Moroccan troops and European mercenaries, equipped with the most up-to-date muzzle-loading guns. The Moroccan force consisted of 4,000 soldiers, 600 noncombatants and 10,000 camels to carry their equipment. It took them two months to cross the desert and up to a quarter of them perished in the attempt. Their arrival on the banks of the Niger, however, took the people and ruler of Songhay by surprise. And at the battle of Tondibi, near Gao, on 12 March 1591, the massed charges of the huge Songhay army were thrown into confusion by the Moroccans' disciplined use of firearms.

Morocco and the fall of Songhay



After their deceptively easy victory at Tondibi, the Moroccans went on to capture Timbuktu and Jenne, but they failed in their conquest of the region as a whole. The bulk of the Songhay army survived, having fled the Moroccan firearms at Tondibi, and they now regrouped in the Songhay heartland of Dendi. They had quickly learned the futility of an open charge against guns. In the years that followed, Askiya Nuhu instead conducted a protracted and spirited guerrilla resistance, which wore down the resources and resolve of the alien intruders. At the same time, Moroccan presence in the countryside beyond Gao, Timbuktu and Jenne was constantly threatened by raids from Fulani and Tuareg nomads.

Apart from the early years of looting and enforced payment of taxation, the invasion brought little long-term financial reward for the sultan of Morocco. In fact, persistent Songhay resistance ensured that the cost of keeping an active army south of the Sahara became a serious drain on Moroccan resources. Moroccan presence on the Niger depended on a constant supply of guns and other expensive equipment, much of which had to be bought from Europe in exchange for west African gold. And the Moroccan government was not getting enough gold out of Songhay to cover this expense.

After Sultan Ahmad's death in 1603, Moroccan enthusiasm for their empire declined, although some Moroccan presence remained on the Niger in the seventeenth century. The expatriate Moroccans, now known as *Arma*, married into the local population and settled down as military governors of the Niger Bend region. By the mid-seventeenth century, they were acting independently and ceased sending tribute to the sultan of Morocco. The final pretence of acknowledging Moroccan authority ended in 1660 when the sultan's name was dropped from Friday prayers in the mosques of Timbuktu, to be replaced by the name of the local *Arma* governor.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Tuareg nomads pressed ever-further southwards. *Arma* rule finally collapsed in 1737 when the Tuareg seized Timbuktu itself and established their own control over the valuable grasslands of the middle Niger Bend.

The former Empire of Songhay split up into a number of independent kingdoms. One of the more important of these was the Bamana Kingdom of Segu, which developed in the region of the upper Niger Delta. It came under strong Sudanic Muslim influence. The following observations on Segu were written by the Scottish traveller Mungo Park, who reached Segu from the Gambia in 1796:

Sego, the capital of Bambarra [Bamana] ... consists, properly speaking, of four distinct towns; two on the northern bank of the Niger, called Sego Korro and Sego Boo; and two on the southern bank, called Sego Soo Korro and Sego See Korro. They are all surrounded with high mud walls; the houses are built of clay, of a square form, with flat roofs; some of them have two storeys, and many of them are whitewashed. Besides these buildings, Moorish mosques are seen in every quarter; and the streets, though narrow, are broad enough for every useful purpose, in a country where wheel-carriages are entirely unknown. From the best inquiries I could make ... Sego contains altogether about thirty thousand inhabitants.

The king of Bambarra constantly resides at Sego See Korro; he employs a great many slaves in conveying people over the river, and the money they receive ... furnishes a considerable revenue to the king ... The view of this extensive city ... formed altogether a prospect of civilisation and magnificence, which I little expected to find in the bosom of Africa.¹

The Sultanate of Borno-Kanem

The growth of Kanem

By the eleventh century, the state of Kanem was becoming a powerful force to the northeast of Lake Chad (see [Chapter 6](#) for the origins of Kanem). It had been founded by Kanuri-speaking nomad clans who built up their wealth by raiding neighbours and engaging in the trans-Saharan trade. Much of their trading wealth came from the exchange of southern captives for horses from north Africa. The use of horses enabled the Kanem nomads to raid their neighbours more effectively.

In the second half of the eleventh century, the Kanuri-speaking Saifawa clan established a new Islamic dynasty in Kanem. Islam had been an important influence in the state from as early as the ninth century. By the thirteenth century, the Kanuri of Kanem were marrying into the local farming population. Regulated taxation of the farmers near the capital, Njimi, began to replace the former irregular pattern of nomad raids and extortion.

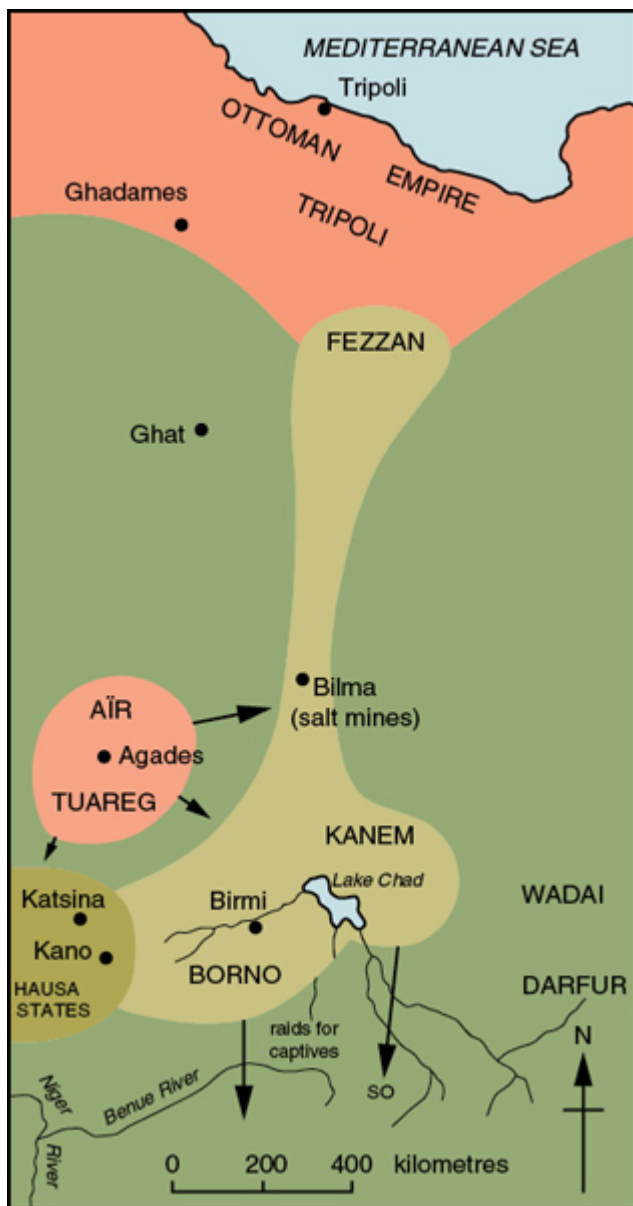
Kanem reached the height of its power during the reign of Mai Dunama Dibalami (r. 1210–48). ‘Mai’ was the title subsequently assumed by each successive ruler. He commanded a cavalry force of 40,000 horsemen, which he used to extend Kanem control over trans-Saharan trade as far as the Fezzan. Raids against the So, southwest of Lake Chad, were justified in the name of a jihad (holy war) against the unbeliever. Captives taken in these raids were used to exchange for further horses from north Africa. Increased contact across the desert prompted the growth of Islam among the Kanuri-speaking population, and pilgrimages to Mecca became a regular occurrence. A hostel was established in Cairo for pilgrims and students from Kanem.

The rise of Borno

By the end of the thirteenth century, a tributary state had been established in Borno, southwest of Lake Chad, in the northeastern region of modern Nigeria. During the fourteenth century, Kanem went into decline and Borno began acting independently, trading directly

across the desert and refusing to pay tribute. Kanem itself was becoming overstretched. It lacked the natural resources for such a large state and, since the reign of Mai Dunama Dibalami, had become too dependent on the personal authority of the Mai. Pastures were drying out and becoming overgrazed. At the same time, the Saifawa dynasty was struggling with a rival nomad clan for the leadership of Kanem. In about 1400, the Saifawa dynasty saved their state from complete disintegration by moving their capital to the better grassland region of Borno. Kanem then officially became the tributary state, at times acting independently, at times acknowledging the authority of Borno.

Borno-Kanem in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries



By establishing their capital in Borno, the Mais of the Saifawa dynasty gained access to a wider trading network. During the fifteenth century, they established important trading links with the Hausa to the west, supplying salt and horses in exchange for Akan gold.

During the course of the sixteenth century, the Mais strengthened their grip on the people of Borno. There must have been considerable extortion of the peasantry because Borno was shaken by a series of internal revolts. These were savagely put down as the Mais waged jihads across the country. Firm control was established over the

peasant population who, once they submitted, were no longer subjected to raids. The income of the state became based more firmly on regular taxation of the peasantry and customs dues on trade. In the central Borno region, taxes were assessed and charged on a village or family basis. Further afield, traditional chiefs were left in charge provided they paid a regular tribute. Raids for captives now extended far to the south of Chad.

During the second half of the sixteenth century Mai Idris Aloma strengthened his army with the importation of firearms from north Africa. Unlike Songhay, which failed to modernise its army, the Mais of Borno brought in Turkish mercenaries and advisers to train the new army. The Mais' tribute collectors ranged as far west as the Hausa state of Kano. At the same time, friendly relations were established with the Ottoman rulers of Tripoli. The dominance of Borno at this time helped drain trans-Saharan trade away from Songhay and the western routes, which, by the end of the century, led to the Moroccan decision to invade Songhay in an attempt to revive the gold trade across the western Sahara.

We know little about the internal affairs of Borno in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Until recently, historians tended to assume it was a period of decline, but there is little firm evidence that this was so. Compared with the warfare of the sixteenth century, it was a relatively peaceful period. Borno became a centre of Islamic learning, and the written records we do have of the time concentrate mainly on religious developments. Islam spread and the Kanuri language became dominant in the region. Slave raiding further south remained an important source of royal income, and the eastern Hausa states continued to pay tribute until the end of the eighteenth century. But Borno's military superiority gradually declined as their firearms became obsolete and were not updated. Perhaps the period of prolonged peace had allowed the development of military complacency. The Tuareg Sultanate of Air asserted its independence and was operating freely at Borno's Saharan salt mines by the 1750s. Borno no longer dominated the trade of the central Sudan, although it was not deprived of access to trans-Saharan routes.

The Hausa city-states

The Hausa city-states first emerged between 1000 and 1200 CE. The Hausa developed from a mixture of southern Saharan nomads and local mixed farmers of the northern Nigerian savannah. Their basic political unit was a compact walled village. The wooden stockades of

the early Hausa villages existed to protect the inhabitants from southern Saharan raiders. The stockades covered a large area enclosing not only the principal dwellings of the settlement, but also a considerable extent of cultivable land. In times of trouble, the village enclosure could protect the Hausa of the district and their livestock through a lengthy siege. As the population increased, villages grouped together under the protection of the largest local Hausa town. In time, these developed into walled cities, which became the capitals of states.

The economic basis of the Hausa city-states was agriculture, manufacturing and trade, although each had its own particular specialisation. Gobir, the northernmost, had originally developed at Air, but moved south to Gobir under Tuareg pressure in the fifteenth century. From an early stage, Gobir's strength came from its trans-Saharan trading contacts on the eastern fringes of the Mali and Songhay Empires. Katsina, founded in the twelfth or thirteenth century, was also an important trading centre. Kano built its wealth on its craftsmen and manufacturing skills, especially in the weaving of cotton cloth (Figure 12.1). Later, the Hausa of Kano developed the further skills of cloth dyeing and leatherwork (Figure 12.2). Dark-blue cotton cloth from Kano was much sought after among the peoples of west Africa. And a large amount of so-called 'Moroccan' leather sold from north Africa to Europe originated from the Hausa craftsmen of Kano.

The southernmost Hausa state, Zazzau, with its capital at Zaria, was founded in the sixteenth century. It was to become a major supplier of slaves to the other Hausa states, raided from the Kwararafa in the region of the Benue River. Some of these slaves were for internal Hausa labour, others were for export to Borno and north Africa in exchange for horses, harnesses and guns.

Slavery was important in Hausa society. The Hausa of the cities were engaged in trade, warfare, manufacture and the elaborate bureaucracy of government. Slave labour, imported from outside, was used to build and maintain the city walls and to grow the food to feed the teeming cities. In addition, beyond the city walls were numerous free cultivators and herders who paid taxes to the state. Growing trading contacts introduced the Hausa to the world of Islam. The ruling élite of the city-states became Muslim in the fourteenth century, although the bulk of the common people were as yet untouched by the Muslim faith.

Figure 12.1 Kano in the nineteenth century. From the thirteenth century, Kano became an important centre for the production of cotton

cloth and, in due course, leatherwork, much of which was exported across the Sahara to Morocco. Indeed, most of the highly valued 'Moroccan leather' sold into Europe at this time originated from Kano. Drawing by a German artist (1851).



Source: *ilbusca/iStock*.

The Hausa states flourished from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. There was great rivalry between them and states rose and fell in relative importance. But no one Hausa state managed to subdue all the others. There was no single Hausa 'empire'.

The geographical positioning of the Hausa states enabled them to play an important role as middlemen in the development of long-distance trade: at first between Songhay and Borno, and later between the Akan goldfields and Borno and Aïr. But increasing rivalry and rising levels of warfare between the Hausa states had important consequences for their internal development. Warfare devastated the countryside and yet to finance their wars, the ruling class overtaxed the peasantry. And in their efforts to increase the supply of slaves, the Hausa ruling élite resorted to enslaving fellow Muslim commoners, a step prohibited in Islam, often selling them to north Africa in exchange for firearms and horses.

With the eighteenth-century spread of Islam among the Hausa

masses, there was a greater awareness of the principles of Islamic or *Shari'a* law. The corruption, oppression and sacrilegious slaving of the Hausa rulers saw their regime called into question by Islamic religious leaders. The stage was set for the 'holy revolution' that was to sweep the region in the early nineteenth century ([Chapter 16](#)).

Figure 12.2 Modern photo of the dye pits at Kano. Cotton cloth dyed here was a major trade item from at least the thirteenth century, transported throughout western Africa and across the Sahara to north Africa.



Source: Karsten/Alamy Stock Photo.

Wolof kingdoms of Senegambia

The break-up of the Ghana Empire in the early thirteenth century enabled the Wolof-speaking people of the Senegambia region to form the Jolof Empire, which lasted until the mid-sixteenth century. In 1549, a provincial ruler led a successful rebellion that resulted in the break-up of the empire and the formation of a number of independent Wolof kingdoms.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Wolof kingdoms colluded with Europeans in the Atlantic slave trade, although the numbers of slaves exported numbered hundreds rather than thousands per year. At least as many slaves were retained within

Wolof society and worked to produce food surpluses for the royal courts and for export to the coastal trading towns. The Atlantic trade created a thriving market for food to feed the slaves gathered at Gore Island and St Louis awaiting export on European, mainly French, slaving ships. Meanwhile, Wolof merchants became well established at the coastal towns, making Wolof the dominant urban culture and language of the Senegambia region. In playing an intermediary role between the coast and the riverine hinterland, Wolof merchants prompted the free peasants and slave-holding landowners of the interior to cultivate produce for the new urban markets. Thus, Wolof farmers and merchants were in a position to respond rapidly as market demand changed to groundnuts in the early nineteenth century.

Kingdoms of the forest: Ife and Benin

The Yoruba form one of the larger language groups in the western part of modern Nigeria. The word 'Yoruba' originated as a Hausa name for the people of the Oyo Empire (see below). In modern usage, it refers to all those speaking the same language as the peoples of Oyo. In historic times, the Yoruba-speaking peoples stretched from the savannah woodlands west of the lower Niger to deep into the forest towards the coast (see [Map 12.3](#)). They were basically mixed farmers, hunters and traders, living in small village communities.

State formation among the Yoruba seems to have begun in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As with many other African societies, sources of state authority were related to religion. According to the myth of creation in Yoruba religion, Olorun, the 'God of the Sky', lowered the Yoruba founding ancestor, Oduduwa, down to earth at Ife. There he founded the original Yoruba state and his sons dispersed to head the other Yoruba kingdoms. The ooni (ruler) of Ife based his claim to kingship on his reputed direct descent from the founding ancestor, Oduduwa.

The economic basis of the early Yoruba states was their ability to produce a food surplus. This enabled them to feed not only their rulers and officials, but also numerous court craftsmen and artists. As with many other states, profit from trade was soon added to taxation of the peasantry as a major source of royal revenue.

It was no coincidence that Ife was the original Yoruba state and the one that produced some of the finest artistic artefacts in the whole of west Africa. Ife was perhaps the best placed of all the Yoruba states to produce a food surplus. It was founded on the borders of the savannah

and the forest, with fertile soil and high rainfall. The varied environment was suitable for a range of root and cereal crops and the raising of domestic animals. We know little about the social or economic organisation of Ife, but its inhabitants certainly had the time and wealth to develop highly refined artistic skills, and it is for these that the forest kingdoms are best known.

The artists of Ife produced a wide range of wood and ivory carvings, terracotta sculptures, and bronze, brass and copper castings (see [Figure 12.3](#)). Most of those that have been recovered by archaeologists have been dated to the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. The terracottas and metal castings are remarkably realistic images of oonis and were probably used in funeral ceremonies. The use of copper indicates trading links with Saharan mines. In exchange for copper, and possibly salt, the Yoruba probably traded food, kola nut and ivory to the peoples of the Sahel.

West African states and societies in the eighteenth century

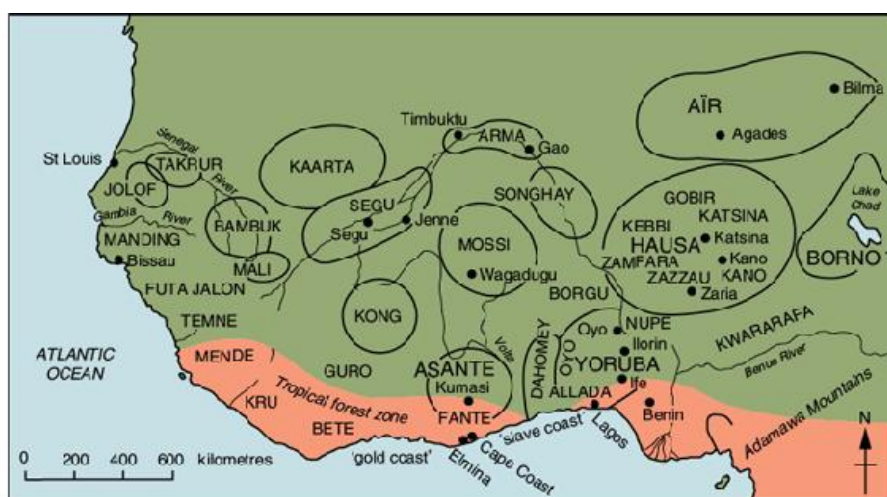


Figure 12.3 Ife bronzes. The artistic skills and concepts displayed here were clearly developed from earlier artistic traditions of the southern Nigerian forest, such as Igbo-Ukwu.



Source: Paul Almasy/Getty Images.



Source: Werner Forman/Getty Images.

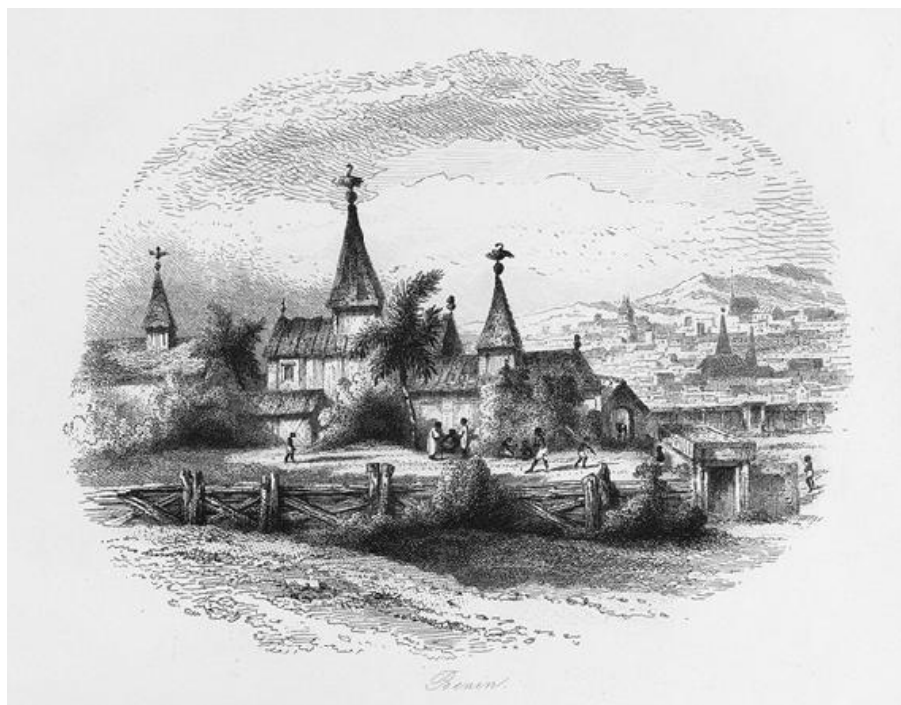
It is not, of course, surprising to find such highly developed artistic skills among the peoples of this region. We have seen in [Chapters 3 and 6](#), with reference to the Nok culture and the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes, that the peoples of west Africa had an ancient tradition of fine artistic work in terracotta and copper alloys. Techniques of metal casting need not necessarily have been imported from afar.

To the south and east of Ife, towards the Niger Delta and deep within the forest, were the Edo-speaking peoples. Although they mostly remained in small village chiefdoms, they too developed a centralised state, with its capital at Benin. (This is not to be confused with the modern republic of Benin, which borders western Nigeria.)

Kingship at Benin dated from the eleventh century, at about the same time as it was developing at Ife. Indeed, the *oba* (ruler) of Benin based his authority on claims to descent from Oduduwa, the Yoruba founding ancestor. Benin by the fifteenth century was a huge walled city, several kilometres across. A Dutch visitor to Benin City in about 1600 compared its wide streets and fine houses very favourably with his home capital of Amsterdam (see [Figure 12.4](#)).

Ewuare, oba of Benin in the mid-fifteenth century, built up a powerful standing army and expanded Benin into an extensive empire. By 1500, the Benin Empire stretched from the Niger Delta in the east to the coastal lagoon of Lagos in the west. Ewuare strengthened his administration by selecting and appointing his own district governors. He established a stable system of oba succession by having his eldest son recognised as official heir.

Figure 12.4 View of Benin, Nigeria c.1846. Europeans who saw it were impressed by its sophistication and compared it favourably with their own cities. From Henrion, *Histoire générale des missions catholiques*, vol 1, plate ix.



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

When the Portuguese first contacted Benin in the late fifteenth century, it was still undergoing a period of expansion. Thus, the obas

were prepared to sell their war captives to the Portuguese who, as we saw in [Chapter 11](#), exported them to the Akan in exchange for gold. Early in the sixteenth century, Benin expansion ended and with it the export of captives. Thereafter, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the main exports from Benin to Europeans at the coast were pepper, ivory, gum and cotton cloth. The latter was resold to other west African societies further along the coast. Benin did not resupply the transatlantic slave trade until the eighteenth century when the ancient kingdom was wracked by dynastic dispute and civil war. The sale of its own citizens into slavery and the importation of firearms undermined the productive capacity of Benin and hastened its decline during the eighteenth century.

Benin, like Ife, possessed a highly developed, official court art. Bronze, brass and copper heads and figurines were reproduced to honour and commemorate the obas. Elaborate copper plaques showing the glorious deeds of their past were nailed on their wooden palace walls (see [Figure 12.5](#)). Most of these artistic artefacts were looted or destroyed when British troops sacked the city in 1897 (see [Figure 22.8](#)). The court art of Benin reached its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Portuguese traders provided a new source of copper. The Portuguese themselves were depicted in some of the copper plaques. Benin artists also made a number of ivory carvings, salt cellars and bangles, for sale to Europeans (see [Figure 12.6](#)). These were probably specially commissioned by Portuguese merchants and form perhaps the earliest example of African artists catering for the European tourist market.

Figure 12.5 Benin bronze plaque, formerly mounted on the wooden walls of the oba's palace, and looted by the British in 1897. Note the small square holes through which it had been nailed to the wall.



Source: Werner Forman/Getty Images.

Figure 12.6 Benin ivory salt cellar. Carved out of a single tusk of ivory, items such as these were specifically made for sale to Europeans.



Source: Werner Forman/Getty Images.

Oyo and Dahomey, savannah states of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

The rise of Oyo

Although Ife was the oldest and most senior Yoruba state, it was soon surpassed in importance by the northern state of Oyo. Founded in the

fourteenth century by a descendant of Oduduwa, Oyo, unlike its Yoruba neighbours to the south, was situated in the savannah woodland north of the tropical forest. The region was ideal for growing cereal crops and was also in a powerful trading position between the Yoruba of the forest and the Hausa of the north. In addition, being free of tsetse fly and other disease-carrying insects of the forest, the country was suitable for horses. And it was with their standing army of cavalry that the *alafins* (rulers) of Oyo were able to build their conquest state.

Because Oyo was unable to use cavalry effectively in the forest, its southward expansion was restricted to the southwest. Here, from the west of modern Nigeria to the east of modern Ghana, there is a break in the line of forest where the open savannah reaches down to the coast. Into this region Oyo's cavalry was able to intrude and extend the empire's authority. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Oyo invaded the coastal kingdom of Allada, forcing it to pay tribute, and so gaining access to the Atlantic trade of the Europeans.

The power and wealth of the *alafins* of Oyo grew enormously during the eighteenth century. The economic basis of this power and that which financed the *alafins*' cavalry was the use of slave labour to work on royal farms. These were captives from warfare or traded from the Sahel. Other income came as tributes extracted from the towns and villages of Oyo and from the country's neighbours. There was also a tax on the transit trade between the coast and the Hausa states. In addition, Oyo's incessant wars of expansion produced more captives than were needed on the royal farms. The surplus was dispatched towards the coast to be sold to Europeans as slaves for the Atlantic trade. Firearms, cloth, metal goods and cowrie shells were imported from the coast. Part of this was kept within the empire, but much of it was traded to the north in exchange for horses and further captives.

With the huge increase in the European demand for slaves in the 1780s, Oyo became a major transit hub for slaves between north to south. But overdependence on the slave trade had important repercussions for the rulers of Oyo. When European wars between England and France reduced the trade in slaves in the 1790s, the *alafin* of Oyo lost a major source of income. There was less wealth to reward supporters, and the peasantry in turn were overtaxed. Royal authority declined and around the turn of the century there were a number of regional rebellions. As with the Hausa states, the scene was set for Muslim revolt in the early nineteenth century.

One of those neighbouring states forced to pay tribute to the alafin of Oyo was the kingdom of Dahomey in the modern republic of Benin. (Note that the modern republic of Benin, which changed its name from Dahomey in 1975, bears no direct relationship to the ancient forest kingdom of Benin.) Dahomey was founded in the early seventeenth century. A small group of Aja from the coastal kingdom of Allada moved northwards and settled among the Fon. The latter had hitherto lived in a loosely linked collection of rural villages such as those described in [Chapter 6](#). Within a few years, the Aja began to assert their authority over the Fon. In doing so, they founded the new Kingdom of Dahomey with its capital at Agbome. It was Wegbaja, who became king in about 1650, who organised Dahomey as a powerful centralised state.

Wegbaja declared that he, as king, was the ultimate ‘owner of the land’. This entitled him to introduce direct taxation on the produce of the land, which was only ‘lent’ to its residents. Royal power was strengthened with the establishment of royal succession by primogeniture, that is, succession by the king’s eldest male heir. This prevented traditional village chiefs from having any say in the succession, and so reduced their potential power. At the same time, a ‘cult of kingship’ was developed. It was promoted by the introduction of annual human sacrifices to honour the royal ancestors. The victims of the sacrifices were usually captives taken in warfare.

Having come from the coastal ‘slaving’ state of Allada, the kings of Dahomey were determined to exploit to the full the profits to be gained from the slave trade. Firearms imported from the coast were exchanged for captives taken in Dahomey’s wars of expansion. In the 1720s, Dahomey conquered Allada and Whydah and so gained direct access to the European slave markets at the coast.

It has been suggested by at least one historian that in making these coastal conquests, the Dahomian king Agaja (r. 1716–40) was, in fact, trying to suppress the export of slaves out of Africa. According to this account, Agaja is reported to have asked Europeans to establish plantations in Dahomey, using slave labour, so that the labour of these slaves would not actually be lost to Africa. But Europeans at the time were not interested in the scheme. The transatlantic system was well established and profitable and plantations in Dahomey would be beyond their control. Agaja did not press this policy and Dahomey’s need for firearms was so great that he and his successors continued to sell captives to Europeans.

The hinterland of the ‘Slave Coast’ in the eighteenth century was dominated by Oyo and Dahomey. Rivalry between the two states, particularly over control of the coastal trade in captives, soon led to

conflict. Oyo invaded Dahomey four times in the late 1720s. Agaja was unable to repulse the Oyo cavalry and in 1730 he agreed to pay tribute to the alafin of Oyo.

In spite of its new subservient position with regard to Oyo, the Kingdom of Dahomey continued to expand and thrive during the eighteenth century. Most of the slaves exported from the state came from beyond the country's boundaries. The king himself was not the only dealer in slaves, he was just the largest – the profits of other Dahomian slave dealers were heavily taxed. Taxes were mostly paid in cowrie shells which, by the eighteenth century, had become the most widespread currency in west Africa.

The majority of the Dahomian population remained little affected by the slave trade. They were mostly peasant farmers living in small rural villages. But the king's tax collectors were thorough. They toured regularly through the countryside, assessing for taxation by making censuses of people, livestock, crops and possessions. There were taxes on just about everything. The royal household itself was fed from the produce of large plantations worked by slave labour. In due course, in the nineteenth century, these were turned to producing palm oil for sale to Europeans instead of slaves – the realisation, perhaps, of Agaja's eighteenth-century dream.

The Kingdom of Asante

The origins and rise of Akan states

During the fourteenth century, when the Empire of Mali was at its height, professional Malinke, Bamana and Soninke traders fanned out across the savannah in search of new trading opportunities (see [Chapter 7](#)). In the region of the upper Volta River of modern Burkina Faso and northern Ghana, they were known as Dyula. Gold and kola nuts had filtered out of the forest for many years, but only on a very small scale. Now, with the prompting presence of the Dyula, the Akan of the forest fringes began to exploit these products on a regular basis.

Until this time, the Akan farmers had only entered the forest for hunting or for small-scale, seasonal gold mining. Permanent settlement and farming in the forest was difficult because of the large amount of labour needed to clear the land. It was more profitable for farmers like the Akan to remain on the forest fringes. From about 1400, however, they began using slave labour to clear the forest for planting and to mine the gold. The slaves were bought initially from the Dyula in part-payment for the gold.

During the fifteenth century, permanent Akan settlements

developed within the forest. An Akan who controlled a gold mine used his slave labour both to mine the gold and to grow the food to feed the labour force. In time, free Akan farmers were attracted to settle in the clearings and become the subjects of the new 'owners of the land'. Those who controlled the mines thus became the founders of new Akan chiefdoms.

At the end of the fifteenth century, as we saw in [Chapter 11](#), the Akan found a new market for their gold and a new source of labour for their mines. In the 1480s, the Portuguese set up trading bases on the coast and began buying Akan gold in exchange for slaves from Benin, as well as cotton cloth, metals and other goods. Later, the Akan of the forest were given a further boost to their economy when the Portuguese supplied them with new tropical crops such as maize and cassava from Brazil.

During the sixteenth century, a number of Akan states emerged. There was considerable rivalry between them as they competed for new land and new goldfields or for control of the trade routes to the coast. In due course, all these states were absorbed by the Kingdom of Asante.

The rise of Asante

The Kingdom of Asante was founded by Osei Tutu in the 1670s. He was a military leader and head of the Oyoko clan. He established control over a trading centre near Kumasi. He gathered other clan chiefs around himself and, using Kumasi as his base, he conquered the surrounding Akan chiefdoms. In doing so, he took the title *Asantehene* and founded the Asante Kingdom.

Initially, the Kingdom of Asante was a loose grouping or federation of chiefdoms under the military leadership of Osei Tutu. The chiefs paid him tribute, collected from their villages and from the profits of their goldfields, and provided soldiers as part of the Asantehene's standing army. Osei Tutu's authority over his fellow chiefs was strengthened when he gained the support of religious leaders. One of these religious priests magically conjured up a symbol of Asante kingship, a Golden Stool, which was presented to the Asantehene.

Figure 12.7 Some of the gold regalia of the Asantehene: two finger rings and three wrist and/or knee bracelets. The ring with the elephant signifies the omnipotence of the wearer.



Source: Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images.

Osei Tutu's federation conquered Denkyira and other Akan states and by 1700 controlled most of the goldfields of the forest. His successor Opoku Ware I (r. 1717–50) expanded the boundaries of Asante until it covered most of modern Ghana, from the forest on the coast to savannah in the north. During the eighteenth-century wars of conquest and expansion, the rulers of Asante sold their war captives to slavers at the coast. But they never became dependent on this trade for royal revenue.

In the late eighteenth century, Asantehene Osei Kwadwo (r. 1764–77) introduced a new, centralised administration. The federation of hereditary chiefdoms was done away with. Government officers were appointed or promoted by merit rather than by birth and much of the provincial collection of taxation was removed from local hereditary chiefs. The army was also restructured on a more centralised basis, with military officers appointed directly by the king.

Slave labour remained the basis of most gold production. Some of

these gold mines were directly owned by the king and operated by his agents. Others were owned by Akan chiefs who paid taxes to the state. At the same time, free Akan peasants washed alluvial gold from the rivers on a seasonal basis. This was sold to itinerant Akan traders, many of whom were direct agents of the king. These itinerant traders bought cloth, metal and European firearms from the coast, or salt, cloth and other trading items from the north and travelled through the country selling them in exchange for gold. Even the remotest villagers were brought within this very extensive network. In this way, the maximum amount of gold was extracted in Asante. And the king, either through taxation or from the direct trading of his agents, was able to gain the greatest profit from the business.



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SECTION 6



STATE RENEWAL AND FORMATION IN NORTH, EAST, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



The underlying theme of this period in Egypt, the most populous country on the continent, was the rise and fall of dynasties. The bedrock of all Egyptian dynasties was the agricultural production of the peasantry. The success of each dynasty was dependent on two things: the extraction of maximum wealth from the peasantry through the 'tax farming' system; and the extensive use of slave soldiers – Mamluk horsemen from western Asia and Sudanese foot soldiers from south of Egypt. Each of these institutions was open to corruption and abuse, ultimately leading to the overthrow of a weakened regime and its renewal by a new dynasty, from Fatimid, through Ayyubid and Mamluk to final incorporation into the Ottoman Empire.

South of Egypt, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries witnessed the migration of pastoralist groups into hitherto sparsely populated zones, their establishment of political and economic power over groups of settled farmers, and their formation of new states or the strengthening of old ones. In the Upper Nile valley, Muslim cattle pastoralists formed the Funj Sultanate, which ruled the region of present-day Sudan in this period; while in Ethiopia, Oromo pastoralists extended their grazing lands northwards up the southern highland valleys and

established themselves as a permanent part of a weakened Ethiopian state.

South of Sudan and Ethiopia, cattle pastoralism was dominant. Specialised pastoralists from southern Sudan, prominently the Maasai, migrated into what are now Kenya and Tanzania, making use of lightly populated pastures. To the west of the Victoria Nyanza, pastoralists asserted power over settled farmers and, in doing so, created the hierarchical states of Rwanda, Burundi and Nkore. A notable exception to this pastoral theme was Buganda, whose rise to centralised power close to the great lake was based on the cultivation of plantain and the banana.

The woodland savannah south of the Congo forest was unsuitable for raising cattle. Here, the main theme was the growing importance of international trade. The mixed farming and hunting communities of the central region built powerful states by converting the collection of tribute into long-distance trade. Their influence spread across the region. In the latter western zone, however, states and societies were distorted or destroyed by the impact of the ever-present transatlantic trade in slaves, initiated by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. It was the one part of Africa where militarised African leaders consistently waged war with the specific purpose of gathering captives to sell. By the end of the eighteenth century, the impact of the hunt for captives was beginning to be felt in the heart of central Africa.

South of the Zambezi, once again it is cattle that feature as a primary source of sustenance and political and economic power. On the Zimbabwe plateau, the Rozvi cattle keepers expelled the Portuguese from the east and kept close control over the trade in gold. The power of pastoralists was further emphasised south of the Limpopo River, where Tswana, Sotho and Nguni states rose to prominence on the back of successful cattle keeping, supplemented by cultivation. Here, a late eighteenth-century feature was increasing competition, often violent, between powerful states for natural resources and international trade. These conflicts were to become a major feature of the early nineteenth century.

Even the ruthless, violent intrusion of white settlement from the Cape of Good Hope was primarily based on pastoralism and hunting, aside from the immediate hinterland of Cape Town. The rapid expansion of white settlement was backed up by the gun and ultimately led to the permanent exclusion of indigenous pastoralists. The defining feature of the ever-expanding Cape, however, was the resistance they confronted from the Khoesan herders and hunter-gatherers and, further east, from the southernmost mixed farming and cattle-keeping chieftaincies of the Xhosa. It was the latter resistance that largely shaped the segregated South Africa that was to emerge in

the late nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 13

North and northeast Africa to the eighteenth century

The ‘Arabisation’ of northern Africa

From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, large numbers of Arab pastoral nomads, known as Bedouin (from the Arabic *badawin*, ‘desert dwellers’), moved gradually out of Arabia and into northern Africa. Migration from the deserts of Arabia was nothing new (see [Chapter 5](#)). These were highly mobile communities, living in tented dwellings made from camel skin that they could easily dismantle and re-erect ([Figure 13.1](#)). They were frequently on the move as they herded their camels and goats from one source of pasture and water to the next. In general, they travelled in small, family-based clans and there was little overarching unity among them. At times, they disrupted settled agricultural communities, but they were probably blamed for more chaos and disturbance than they actually caused. Although Muslim, they were generally nonliterate. This may partly account for the prejudice felt towards them by literate Arab scholars who accused them of widespread rural destruction in the Maghrib. Nevertheless, they spread the Islamic faith and the Arabic language and culture.

Figure 13.1 Berber or Bedouin family and their tents, Sahara, late nineteenth century.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Within a few decades of 1050, some 250,000 Arab nomads had moved from Egypt westwards into the Maghrib. Those taking a northern coastal route were known as the Banu Hilal, while the Banu Sulaym went inland, south of the Atlas. The latter absorbed large numbers of Berbers, although Berber languages survived in mountainous regions of the Atlas and among the Sanhaja and the Tuareg of the Sahara. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Arabised Berber nomads known as Hawwara moved back eastwards from the Maghrib into Egypt and pushed south up the Nile valley to the region of the first cataract ([Map 13.1](#)). Earlier Arab nomads had already preceded them southwards into Nubia. It was during this period that the local populations of Egypt and the Maghrib became largely Arabic speaking.

From Fatimid to Mamluk: Egypt before the Ottoman conquest

Egypt under the Fatimids, 969–1171 ce

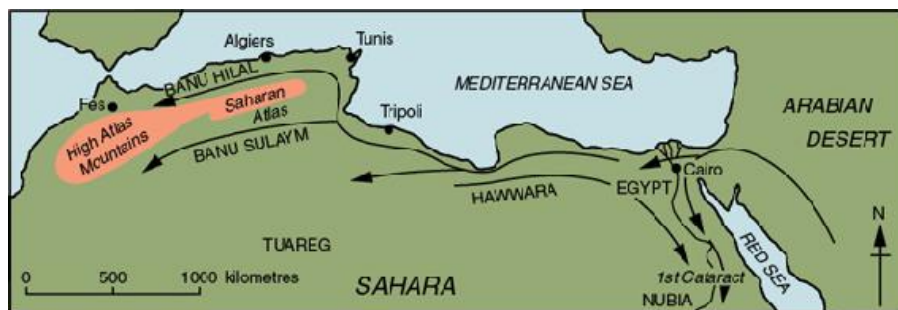
The rule of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt was initially a period of considerable prosperity, at least for the ruling class. Dams and canals were repaired and the production of wheat, barley, flax and cotton increased. The delta region became a centre for the development of a

thriving cotton and linen textile industry, much of it under the direct control of the caliph. Trade revived along the Red Sea, and Egyptian merchants grew wealthy on the transit traffic between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The caliphs minted their own gold coins and the Fatimid dinar became a basic unit of international currency in the rising Swahili towns along the east African coast (see [Chapter 10](#)).

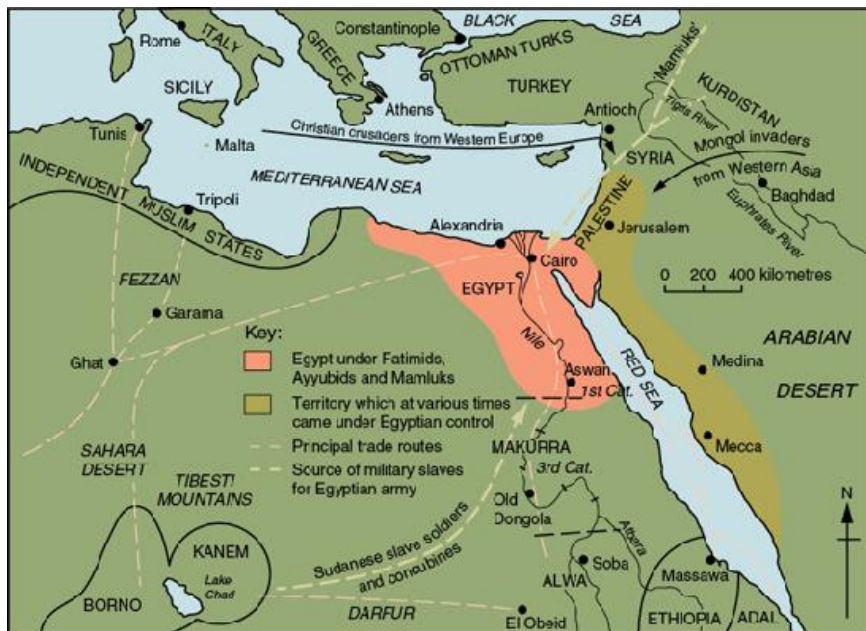
The Fatimid caliphs charged heavy customs duties on all imports and exports but, as usual in Egypt, the main source of government income was taxation of the peasantry. The collection of taxes was contracted to Fatimid Berbers, who soon settled down in the role of a new landed aristocracy, in effect becoming ‘landlords’ over vast areas of the fertile Nile valley. These ‘tax farmers’ paid an agreed sum to the caliph and were free to keep whatever further taxes they could collect for themselves. Thus, it was in their interests to ‘squeeze’ the peasantry as hard as they could, and this they did. The system was open to abuse and corruption and powerful tax farmers often failed to pay their portion to the caliph, who was generally too weak to confront them.

The Fatimids had initially conquered Egypt with a small but effective Berber army. As these Berbers settled down to form a new ruling élite, grown too prosperous and comfortable to take up their swords, the caliphs resorted to the importation of slaves to boost the ranks of the army. The principal strength of this army was the cavalry, made up of free Berbers and Turkish slave horsemen known as ‘Mamluks’. The foot soldiers were mostly black Sudanese slaves imported from south of the Sahara.

Migrations of Arab Bedouin into north Africa, 950–1350 ce



Egypt under Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk rule, 969–1517



As government income from the tax farming system declined through corruption, the caliph was unable to pay for the upkeep of his army. By the mid-twelfth century, discontented soldiery regularly looted the countryside. Factional in-fighting between Mamluk, Berber and Sudanese units disrupted trade and cultivation, and seriously weakened the authority of the Fatimids.

In the 1160s, Fatimid Egypt was in danger of being overrun by Christian Crusaders from western Europe, who had already established the kingdoms of Antioch and Jerusalem in neighbouring western Asia. Egypt was saved from Christian conquest largely by the actions of Salah al-Din ibn Ayyub, a Sunni Muslim, the leader of a small band of professional soldiers who had originally come from Kurdistan, east of Turkey. He reorganised the Egyptian army, declared a jihad and expelled the Christian army from the borders of Egypt. He followed this up by recapturing Jerusalem for Islam in 1187, an action that prompted the Third Crusade from western Europe. He is known in European history as Saladin, the great Muslim opponent of the Third Crusade. On the death of the last Fatimid caliph in 1171, Salah al-Din became ruler of Egypt and founder of the Ayyubid dynasty.

The Ayyubid dynasty, 1171–1250

Salah al-Din returned the government of Egypt to stability and prosperity. He brought Egyptians back to the orthodox Sunni Muslim faith and made Cairo an important centre of Arab and Islamic learning

and culture. Perhaps his most important innovation was that, in reorganising the army, Salah al-Din combined military recruitment with a reform in the system of taxation. He revived the regular importation of young Mamluk slaves from Turkey. Armed with a bow and arrow and a light curved sword and mounted on horseback, they were trained into a highly disciplined force. Successful Mamluks earned their freedom and became military commanders. At the same time, the ‘tax farms’, known as *iqta*, were taken over by the state and reallocated to Mamluk officers. In return, the latter used the income they gained from taxing the peasantry to supply the state with a certain number of full-time soldiers, dependent on the size of the *iqta*.

In effect, the Mamluks became a new military and landed aristocracy, the more powerful of them assuming the title of *amir*. In 1250, they challenged the authority of the sultan himself. A group of Mamluk amirs murdered the last Ayyubid sultan and took over the sultanate themselves. In doing so, they founded the first of two Mamluk dynasties, which ruled Egypt for the next 250 years.

Egypt under the Mamluks, 1250–1517

The Mamluks ruled Egypt as a powerful military aristocracy. The army was constantly strengthened by the importation of new Mamluks from Turkey and southern Russia. In the first few decades of the Mamluk dynasty, their Egyptian empire was extended into the western Asian territories of Palestine and Syria ([Map 13.2](#)). The defeat of the central Asian Mongols and the European Christian ‘Fourth Crusade’ further strengthened Egypt’s claim to be the defender as well as the intellectual centre of Islam. Mamluk ‘protection’ was extended over the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, and Cairo became a regular stopping-off point for pilgrims to Mecca, especially from the Maghrib and the west African Sudan. Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage from Mali (1324–5) has already been referred to (see [Chapter 7](#)). Gold and emerald mines were developed with slave labour in the mountains east of Aswan, and Red Sea trade was expanded under Mamluk control.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the wealth of any Egyptian dynasty was always under-pinned by the productive capacity of the Egyptian peasantry. The Egyptian *fellahin* (Arabic for peasant) were hereditary holders of their small family plots in the fertile floodplain of the valley of the Nile. Although a family plot was usually passed down from one generation to the next, a peasant who failed to pay the tax demanded was often expelled from his land. The productivity of a plot was calculated in advance and a tax was

imposed on all crops: fruit trees, honey and wax, as well as field crops of barley, wheat and flax. Even domestic livestock, chickens, goats and cattle, were liable to an annual tax. The *fellahin* were squeezed particularly hard under the Mamluks as there were no restraints on the *iqta*-holder's power. Indeed, *fellahin* were so heavily taxed during this period that they often had to borrow back their own grain from their 'landlord' in order to have enough food to survive. Mamluks also restricted the freedom of movement of the *fellahin* to prevent their 'desertion' to the cities.

Figure 13.2 The Citadel and Muhammad Ali Mosque, Cairo. The fortified walls of the Citadel were built by order of Salah al-Din, 1176–83. The Muhammad Ali Mosque is much more recent, and was built within the Citadel between 1830 and 1848 and named after Egypt's ruler at that time.



Source: Leonid Andronov/iStock.

Not only were the Egyptian *fellahin* particularly heavily taxed under the Mamluks, they also had to provide their labour freely on demand for public works. Even then they had to supply all their own food, tools and draught animals. During the fourteenth century, the Mamluks ordered a great expansion of public works. They organised the building of new dams and canals in order to extend irrigation in the Nile Delta and the valley. This enabled new land to be brought into cultivation, which in turn meant new villages of *fellahin* could be established to distribute as further *iqta* and thus more tax could be raised for the Mamluks.

The Mamluk *iqta*-holders lived mostly in the cities where their

displays of great wealth were a stimulus to the trade in luxuries from the African interior, the east coast and the Indian Ocean. It has been estimated that, in the early fourteenth century, there were about 10,000 Mamluks in Egypt ruling over as many as 4–5 million Egyptians.

During the course of the fifteenth century, the system of linking taxation with military service collapsed. Mamluks treated their *iqta* as their own hereditary possession and ceased to provide military service. With increasing corruption among city-based Mamluks, public works ceased, canals became blocked and there was a decline in agricultural productivity. To this were added natural disasters of drought, locust infestation and plague. Famine followed, and many farms were abandoned. The sultan, unable to rely on the military service of the Mamluks, taxed trade more heavily to pay for his army of Mamluk cavalry and Sudanese foot soldiers. This prompted a general decline in Egyptian trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. And this was just at the time when the Portuguese were moving round the southern tip of Africa to challenge Muslim trading domination of the western Indian Ocean.

Figure 13.3 An Egyptian peasant working in the Nile valley. Although this is a modern photograph, he is using ancient technology for raising water from the Nile for irrigating his crops.



Source: *atlantic kid/iStock*.

The reputation of the Mamluk army rested mainly on their skilful

use of horsemen armed with bow and arrow and sword. This was what had halted the Mongol advance into Palestine in 1260. Resting on their past reputation, the Mamluks failed to take account of the fifteenth-century revolution in warfare with the development of firearms and cannon. By 1500, the Mamluk army was disorganised and hopelessly out of date. It proved no match for the modernised army of the Ottoman Turks who drove the Mamluks out of Palestine and conquered Egypt in 1517.

Egypt under Ottoman rule

The rise of the Ottoman Turks as a world power can be dated to their conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Changing that ancient city's name to Istanbul, they made it the capital of a vast empire. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire stretched across much of southeastern Europe, western Asia and northern Africa.

With the Ottoman conquest of 1517, Egypt lost its independence and became a province within a western Asian empire. The ruler of Egypt was henceforth a viceroy, appointed from, and answerable to, Istanbul. The Ottomans restored and reallocated the *iqta* system of land holding, taxation and military service. Egypt's southern boundary was pushed into Nubia as far as the third cataract in the 1550s. Trade was revived and, in an attempt to counter Portuguese advances in the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea port of Massawa was seized. This prevented Portuguese access to the trade of the Red Sea and in particular to Ethiopia. But the Ottomans failed to regain for Egypt effective direct access to the Indian Ocean network.

During the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the hereditary Mamluk nobles gradually regained effective power in Egypt. The heads of the wealthy noble families were known as *beys*. The viceroys, known as *pashas*, had initially been expatriate Turks appointed from Istanbul. But, by at least 1700, they had set up dynasties of *pashas* who operated independently from Istanbul in all but name for much of the eighteenth century. With so much power in the hands of a corrupt local nobility, Egypt lacked the unity and strength to fend off serious foreign invasion. And, as we shall see in [Chapter 21](#), that invasion was to come in 1798 in the form of a French 'Army of the Orient'.

States of the Maghrib, sixteenth to eighteenth century

The eastern and central Maghrib

A major feature of the sixteenth-century history of the Maghrib was the contest for control of the western Mediterranean between the Christian kingdom of Spain and the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

The Ottomans in the early sixteenth century had reunited Islam in the eastern Mediterranean and extended Ottoman rule into the Maghrib, as far as – but not including – the Marinids of Morocco (see Map 7.3). Meanwhile, the Christian European revival in the west had continued with the Spanish and Portuguese seizure of the strategically important Maghribian ports of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. Turkish corsairs (privateers or pirates) responded by recapturing north African ports and using them as bases for raiding Christian shipping in the western Mediterranean. In the struggle that followed, Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers changed hands several times. The Turks suffered two major defeats, at the Great Siege of Malta (1565) and the Battle of Lepanto off the coast of Greece (1571). With these defeats, the Ottoman Turks lost the chance to dominate Mediterranean shipping lanes. On the other hand, Turkish corsairs had expelled the Spanish and Portuguese from their main north African bases, thus ensuring that the Maghrib remained in Muslim hands.

Egypt under the Ottomans, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries



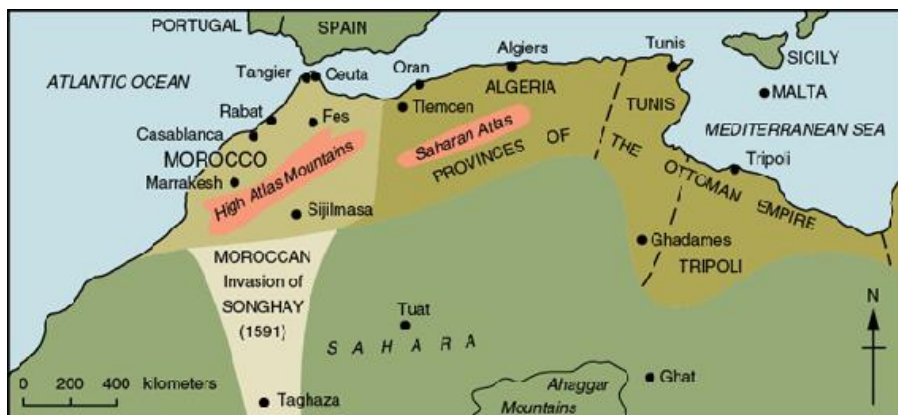
Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers all became major Turkish bases from which their corsairs continued to raid Christian ships during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They and the hinterland behind them became the official Ottoman provinces of Algeria, Tunis and Tripoli ([Map 13.4](#)). In practice, there was no real direct control from Istanbul within the territories. Booty captured from corsair raids provided most of the wealth of the coastal towns, particularly Tripoli and Algiers, which, unlike Tunis, had very little land for cultivation. Further inland, the army, headed by Turkish officers, lived in the towns and periodically raided the pastoralists and cultivators of the countryside for tribute and taxation.

Tripoli also benefited from the trans-Saharan trade via the Fezzan. Direct relations were established between the *pashas* of Tripoli and the sultans of Borno. The latter imported horses, firearms and armour, which were used for catching non-Muslim men and women for sale as slaves and concubines to the wealthy of the Ottoman Empire. Although the Ottoman presence at Tripoli stimulated the development of this shortest route across the desert, the actual traffic of the trans-Saharan trade remained in the hands of independent Tuareg.

The rise of Morocco

In the western Maghrib, the sixteenth century saw the rise of Morocco as an independent state. During the first half of the century, an Arab nomad clan called the Sa'dis (who claimed descent from Muhammad's daughter Fatima) gradually conquered and united the whole of Morocco. In doing so, they not only prevented the Ottomans from extending their empire into the western Maghrib, they also drove the Christian Portuguese from their Atlantic coastal ports. When the Portuguese invaded Morocco in 1578, they suffered a major defeat at the Battle of el-Ksar el Kebir, also known as the Battle of the Three Kings. In the battle the Portuguese king and the sultan of Morocco were both killed. This made way for the accession of Ahmad al-Mansur (r. 1578–1603), whose vigorous rule brought Morocco to the height of its power.

The Maghrib in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries



The major event of Ahmad al-Mansur's reign was the conquest of Songhay in 1591. His aim in doing so was to outflank the Ottoman Turks and to gain exclusive control of Songhay's gold trade. By this time much of the trade in gold from south of the Sahara was being diverted to European traders who had become a significant presence along the west African coast. Through the 1580s, al-Mansur had developed a thriving trade with Spain's great naval rival, England, resurgent under Queen Elizabeth I. Sugar was grown in the Sous valley inland from Agadir by slave labour imported from Songhay. This sugar was exported to England in exchange for English firearms. Al-Mansur then strengthened his army, which contained many slaves from Songhay, by recruiting Arab horsemen from the western plains.

Once these had been trained by European and Turkish mercenary officers into an effective cavalry force, al-Mansur was ready to launch his invasion of Songhay. (For the Songhay perspective of this, see [Chapter 12](#)).

The conquest of Songhay brought al-Mansur initial rewards, mostly in the form of booty from the sacking of Gao and Timbuktu. But in the long run, the Songhay part of the Moroccan empire was a drain on Morocco's resources. The regular trade in gold was disrupted by the predatory nature of Moroccan rule and much of it was diverted eastwards to Tunis, Tripoli and Cairo or southwards to Europeans on the coast of west Africa (see [Chapter 11](#)). At the same time, the occupation of Songhay cost Morocco heavily in military personnel and equipment. Morocco continued to interfere in the Niger Bend region during the seventeenth century, but real power there fell increasingly to local 'Moroccan' military governors who in due course identified more with their middle Niger colony than with Morocco.

Following al-Mansur's death in 1603, the Moroccan state was weakened by dynastic disputes between his sons, and for a while the country was split into the two rival sultanates of Fes and Marrakesh. Unity was re-established by Mawlay al-Rashid, who founded the Alawid dynasty in 1669. His brother and successor Mawlay Isma'il (r. 1672–1727) strengthened his control over the country by importing more Sudanese captives from south of the Sahara. Despite dynastic disputes after his death, Moroccan unity survived. For much of the eighteenth century, however, direct government control and taxation were confined to the regions near Fes and Marrakesh and the string of coastal towns from Tangier to Agadir. Beyond and in the Atlas Mountains, independent nomad clans paid tribute on demand when threatened by action from the sultan's army.

Figure 13.4 Skyline of Marrakesh (Marrakech), Morocco.



Source: Pazhyna/iStock.

Nubia and the Funj Sultanate

The spread of Islam in Nubia

We saw in [Chapter 5](#) that the initial Arab conquest of the Nile valley had been halted at the first cataract by the Christian Nubian kingdom of Makurra. The subsequent gradual spread of Islam through Lower Nubia was partly brought about by centuries of peaceful trading contact with Muslim Egypt. But the main process of Islamisation came in the fourteenth century. It was headed by the persistent southward pressure of Arab nomads. In 1317, the King of Makurra's palace was converted into a mosque (see [Figure 13.5](#)). During the fifteenth century, Arab nomads penetrated further south and west towards Darfur and the direction of Lake Chad. Although they continued to spread their Muslim religion, they intermarried with local Nubians and became heavily 'Africanised' in personnel and culture. By the end of the fourteenth century, these Muslim Nubian pastoralists were raiding south of the eastern Sahara to capture non-Muslim men and women to sell as slaves and concubines to Egypt and western Asia.

The Funj Sultanate

At about the same time as the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, a new non-

Arab power finally replaced the declining Upper Nubian Christian Kingdom of Alwa. It was known as the Funj Sultanate. The Funj were cattle pastoralists and horsemen who originated somewhere to the south of Upper Nubia. Their exact origins remain obscure, but they came from among the numerous pastoral peoples who inhabited the grasslands between the floodplain of the Upper Nile and the eastern foothills of the Ethiopian highlands. During the sixteenth century, they gradually extended their control over the Nubian region of the Blue Nile as far as its confluence with the White Nile, near modern Khartoum. By 1600, they had become Muslim and were living in towns with their capital at Senna. The Funj remained essentially a ruling élite, owning huge herds of cattle and taxing the cultivators settled along the river banks. On the whole, they left the local chieftains in power. But they used their small, effective army of mounted soldiers to collect tribute from a wide range of settled cultivators and nomad pastoralists. In the early seventeenth century, their irregular rule of raid and tribute collection extended as far as the third cataract (see [Map 13.3](#)).

Figure 13.5 The state house of the king of Makurra (or Dongola), Sudan, which was converted to a mosque in 1317.



Source: Andrew McConnell/Robert Harding/Getty Images.

Oromo migrations and the kingdom of Ethiopia

The Oromo migrations

In the early sixteenth century, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the Muslim Sultanate of Adal were struggling for control of the Ethiopian highlands (see [Chapter 8](#)). As both Christian and Muslim military defences in the south were destroyed and local people fled the battle zones, a power vacuum was created in the southern highlands of the region. And into that temporary vacuum moved the Oromo from the south.

The Oromo (formerly known as Galla) were Cushitic-speaking cattle pastoralists who originated in the dry grassland zone to the northeast of Lake Turkana, in the border region of modern northern Kenya and southwestern Ethiopia. Within little more than a single generation (1530–65), the Oromo had occupied the southern third of Ethiopia and were pushing towards the valley of the Awash and the plateau of Harar. But despite the speed and relentless pressure of their occupation, the Oromo did not come as a single, organised mass migration. To understand the nature of the movement, something of the structure of their society needs to be understood.

The Oromo had no overall central authority. Like many pastoral peoples, they lived in a number of loosely organised, extended family clans. Within each clan, Oromo society was organised into a series of five age-sets. As people grew older, they steadily progressed from one age-set to the next. The fifth and oldest set was known as the *tuba* and its members were, in principle, the leaders of the clan. There was little social division between rich and poor and the leader of each adult age-set was elected by its members. The most important age-set was the third, the *folle*, in which the young men acted as military escort and protector of the clan and its cattle. It was they who spearheaded the search for new grazing land.

During the early decades of the sixteenth century, the cattle herds of the Oromo seem to have undergone a rapid expansion. This may have been due to the development of new cattle-keeping skills or simply that the southern foothills of Ethiopia were particularly well suited for intensive cattle grazing. Expansion up the Omo valley and into the southern foothills began as an extension of seasonal grazing migrations between winter and summer pastures. Each year, the *folle* sought out new pastures further up the moister valleys. They moved on foot and were lightly armed with spears. Once the *folle* had settled the cattle in a new grazing zone, the rest of the clan moved their camp up to join them. Partly as a result of recent warfare between Ethiopia and Adal, the region was initially lightly populated, and the Oromo

were able to move into the open grazing zones between the old, established villages of the settled cultivators. Those cultivators who offered resistance were raided and driven out.

Ethiopia in the seventeenth century



The clans that spearheaded the seasonal migration moved ever-

further northward as they, in turn, felt the pressure of other Oromo clans moving up behind them. Once the movement had been allowed to develop, it was impossible to stop. The numbers were too large. And because there were so many separate clans, each with its own vast herds of cattle and operating independently, it was impossible to bring them to battle and 'defeat' them even if the Ethiopians and Adalis had had the strength to try.

As they had already shown, in searching out new grazing territory, the Oromo were pragmatists rather than 'never-changing' pastoralists. Those who came into contact with Muslim Adal converted to Islam, while others converted to the Christianity of Ethiopia. In the central highland zones, many abandoned nomadic pastoralism in favour of settled agriculture. By the early seventeenth century, the Oromo had become the dominant population of the southern half of Ethiopia and were prominent among the Muslims of the Harar plateau.

The kingdom of Ethiopia

The Christian kings of Ethiopia in the late sixteenth century paid little attention to the Oromo incursions from the south. Sarsa Dengel (r. 1562–97) concentrated his hold on the northern half of the kingdom and opened up trading contacts with the Ottoman Turks at Massawa. But apart from personal profit to the rulers, there was little to be gained for Ethiopia from this trade. The principal Ethiopian export was captives taken from southwest of Lake Tana and sold into slavery in Egypt and western Asia. It has been estimated that, in the reign of Sarsa Dengel, as many as 10,000 captives a year were sold to Turkish traders on the Red Sea coast. The removal of so many people from the southwest merely cleared the way for the further expansion of the Oromo from the south.

Figure 13.6 The Ethiopian royal palace at Gondar. Construction of the palace was begun during the reign of Susenyos (1607–32), with architectural advice from a Spanish Jesuit priest, Pedro Paez.



Source: iStock/Getty Images.

Early in the seventeenth century, Susenyos (r. 1607–32) gave official recognition to the Oromo in the central and southern regions of the kingdom. He brought them in as mercenaries to serve in his army in return for permission to tax the local peasantry. This merely legitimised what the Oromo were already doing. The main concentration of seventeenth-century Ethiopian Christian power remained in the north. Under Fasiladas (r. 1632–67), Tigray was brought more closely into the kingdom and a permanent Ethiopian capital was established at Gondar (see [Figure 13.6](#)). During the eighteenth century, however, the kings of Ethiopia lost all effective power over the provinces and the Christian nobility acted virtually independently.



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CHAPTER 14

Central and eastern Africa to the eighteenth century

The east African interior west of the Victoria Nyanza

As we saw in [Chapter 8](#), our knowledge of east African history is very limited, there being no contemporary written sources for the history of the interior until the nineteenth century. The area about which most is known for the period up to 1800 is the inter-lake region, which saw the rise of the kingdoms of Bunyoro and Buganda.

Bunyoro

Bunyoro under the Bito clan was the dominant power in the region by the sixteenth century. The people of Bunyoro practised a mixed economy of farming, hunting and herding. For the most part, they remained a loose confederation of village-based chiefdoms under the overall authority of a king, to whom they paid tribute. The king also called upon the chiefdoms to provide him with military regiments on a temporary basis, which he then used to conduct raids against the country's neighbours. The principal aims of these raids were to seize cattle and bring in additional tribute to the king. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Bunyoro's raids extended south through Nkore to Rwanda and eastwards into Buganda. Indeed, the need to defend themselves from Bunyoro attacks may have been a contributing factor in the desire by the clans of Buganda to organise themselves into a close-knit centralised community in the seventeenth century.

The rise of Buganda

Buganda was, in many ways, quite the opposite of Bunyoro. It

developed as a small compact state under the intensive control of a centralised government. The economy of Buganda was based on its agriculture, and herein lay its strength.

The main agricultural crop in Buganda was the banana and its relative the plantain: grown as a starchy vegetable food rather than a fruit. The core region of Buganda, on the northwest shores of the Victoria Nyanza, was particularly suited to the growth of the banana. It had a rich, fertile soil and a high level of regular rainfall. Once a banana plantation was established, it yielded heavy crops with a minimum amount of labour. What's more, its harvested and rotting vegetation returned natural fertility to the soil. Its growth did not require the constant shifting on to new or fallow land characteristic of the low-technology cereal farming practised over so much of tropical Africa at this time. Thus, Buganda's banana plantations provided the basis for a certain level of economic stability. They allowed the growth of a fairly dense population within a relatively small area. This, combined with the necessity to defend the territory from outside attack, promoted the development of centralised government.

The kings of Buganda took the title *kabaka*. It was Kabaka Mawanga in the early eighteenth century who put Buganda firmly on the road to strong, centralised kingship. The system that he and his successors developed strengthened the power of the king at the expense of traditional clan chiefs.

The east African interior, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries



Wealth and power stemmed from the productivity of the land and the labour of the peasantry. The eighteenth-century *kabakas* ensured that ultimate control of this wealth and power remained within their own hands. The *kabaka* granted landed estates to regional territorial chiefs who were dependent for their position on loyalty to the king rather than any hereditary claim. They, in turn, granted minor chiefs control over smaller parts of those estates. The peasantry, the cultivators, provided the wealth through taxation, which was passed up as tribute from one hierarchical level to another. Banana

cultivation, which did not require full-time labour, was mostly conducted by women. This left male labour available for performing public works such as road building and military service as and when necessary. A complex network of public roads was constructed in Buganda, with all roads ultimately leading towards the capital (see [Figure 14.1](#)). This eased communications from the centre to the regions, which strengthened government control as well as aiding trade. The king was careful to keep the major territorial chieftaincies out of the hands of members of his own royal clan, thus preventing the development of alternate power bases that might have threatened his authority. It was on this basis that Buganda developed as a powerful and expanding centralised kingdom during the course of the eighteenth century. By 1800, it had surpassed Bunyoro in strength, if not yet in size.

Figure 14.1 The capital of Buganda, as seen by H.M. Stanley, 8 April 1875:¹ 'It is sited on the summit of a hill overlooking a great and beautiful district. Great wide roads lead to it from all directions. The widest and principal road is that overlooked from the Durbar of the King's Capital. It is about 400 feet wide and nearly 10 miles long. Either side is flanked by the houses and gardens of the principal men.'

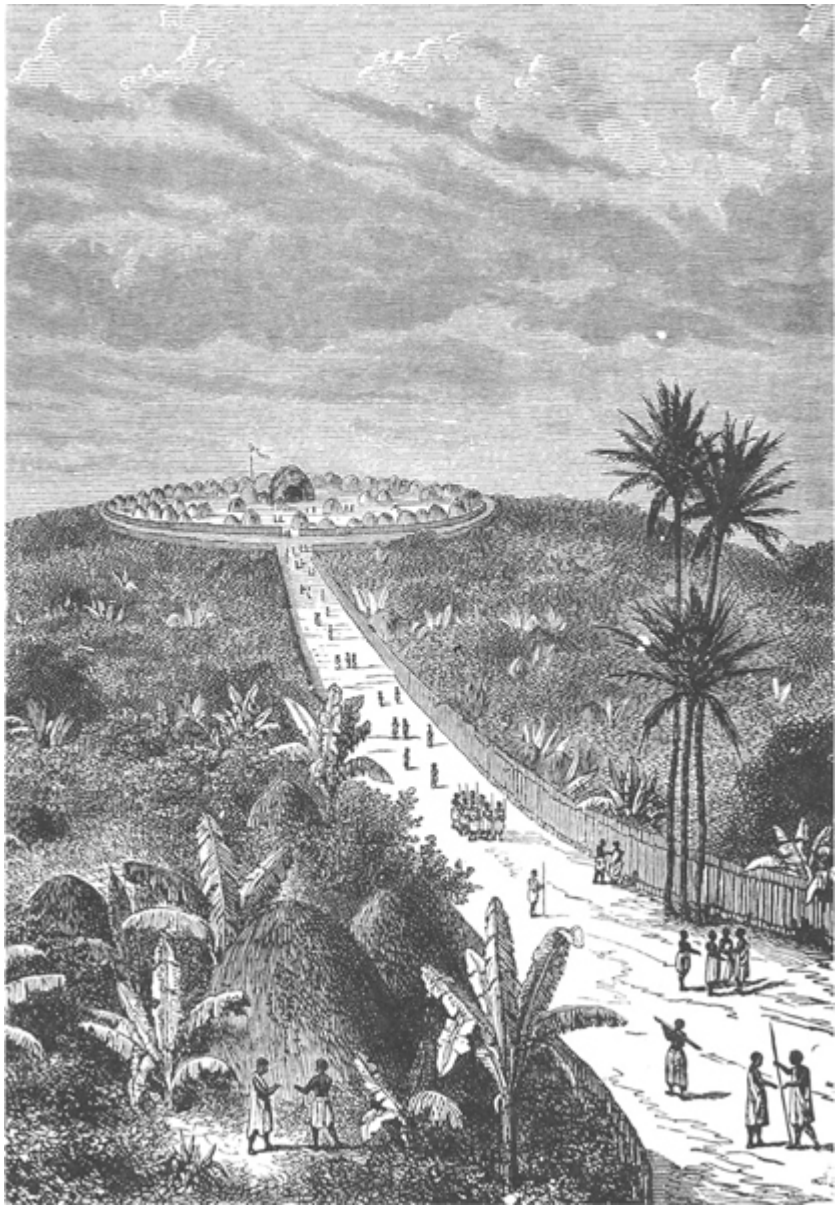


Photo source: [iStockphoto.com/Linda Steward](https://iStockphoto.com/LindaSteward).

1. Stanley, R. and Neame, A. (eds) (1961) *The Exploration Diaries of H.M. Stanley* (William Kimber: London), p. 73.

Pastoralist kingdoms of the southwestern highlands

To the south of Bunyoro and Buganda lay the densely populated fertile highlands of Nkore, Rwanda and Burundi. Here, in contrast to Buganda, the majority agricultural population were dominated by a

minority of pastoralists. As discussed in [Chapter 8](#), the increasing importance of cattle herding in the centuries before 1500 had led to the rise of numerous small kingdoms in the hill country west of the Victoria Nyanza. Mostly they were mixed farming communities, but a few developed as specialist cattle keepers. These were known as Ba-Hima in the north and Ba-Tutsi in the south. The Hima gained ascendancy over the peasant cultivators in Nkore and the Tutsi did likewise in the southwest region of Rwanda and Burundi.

Initially, they were able to take advantage of the natural upland grasslands that lay uncultivated by the farmers. Over the centuries, they developed closer relations with the farming populations: at first trading cattle in exchange for food. But what had started out as balanced trade, the Hima and Tutsi clans distorted into positions of domination. As their herds increased in size, they lent out cattle to the farmers from whom they demanded herding services. And whereas cultivated food had previously been a trading item, it now became a form of tribute to be given as required to the cattle-owning rulers. The latter assumed the role of an aristocratic ‘warrior’ class who offered protection to their subjects from raids by rival Hima and Tutsi clans.

By the eighteenth century, the Tutsi clans of the south had merged into two major kingdoms, Rwanda and Burundi, with northerly Rwanda emerging as the more powerful. Within these aristocratic kingdoms, the Tutsi developed elaborate rituals and myths of ancient origin to justify their dominant position over the subservient ‘Ba-Hutu’ peasantry. Despite this and later twentieth-century distortions, it was not originally an ethnically based system. It was possible for Hutu to pass into the ranks of the Tutsi élite through accumulated wealth, marriage or prowess in war. Nevertheless, class distinction between cattle-owning ruler and cultivating subject was consolidated into a caste system, a system on which ethnic antagonism was to be sharpened in the centuries to come.

The east African interior east of the Victoria Nyanza

To the east of the Victoria Nyanza, the dominant development of this period was the expansion of the Maasai. They belonged to the final movement of Nilotic-speaking pastoralists who pushed southwards into the region in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Referred to variously as the eastern or Plains Nilotes (or Paraniotes), these specialised pastoralists formed the Ateker and Teso of northeastern Uganda, the Turkana and Samburu of northwestern Kenya and the

Maasai of central Kenya and northern Tanzania.

Earlier Nilotic pastoralists had found central Kenyan grazing lands largely unoccupied and so had mingled peaceably with local farming and hunting populations (see [Chapter 8](#)). But as the Maasai pushed through the Rift Valley towards the plains of northern Tanzania, they found the grasslands already occupied by cattle-herding peoples such as the Kalenjin of the central Kenyan highlands. An important part of Maasai expansion, therefore, was the seizure of grazing land by force. In justification of their action, they maintained the belief that all cattle, by definition, belonged to Maasai. The raiding of cattle from other people was merely exercising their right.

Figure 14.2 Maasai women in central Africa, carrying their children on their backs, 1939.



Source: Imagno/Getty Images.

Maasai society was organised on an age-set system developed along military lines. This was similar in some respects to that described for

the Oromo in [Chapter 13](#). The Maasai had three main age-sets: children, young adults and elders. In their early teens, boys were passed through tough initiation ceremonies, which included military training. They then served their young adult lives as full-time soldiers and herdsman. Their duty was to protect their herds and grazing zones and to raid for more of both. The Maasai did not operate as a single coherent group; nor did they practise hereditary chieftaincy. Their various related groups were governed by councils of elders.

Although they raided other cattle-herding people and expelled them from their grazing lands, the Maasai developed peaceable relationships with neighbouring Bantu-speaking farmers. They traded with the Kikuyu and the Kamba for iron weapons and foodstuffs, and there was some level of intermarriage between Maasai and Kikuyu. The latter, who occupied the eastern ridges of the central Kenyan highlands, developed their own age-set system and initiation ceremonies, practices that they seem to have learned from the Maasai.

Over much of modern Kenya and Tanzania, Bantu-speaking farmers still lived in small clan-based chiefdoms. This was particularly so among the peoples of the dry scrub savannah country of the Tanzanian plateau. Some clans gained ascendancy over others, as in the higher rainfall and mixed vegetation regions of Kilimanjaro and the Usambara and Pare Mountains. Here, sizeable states emerged among the Chagga, the Pare and the Shambaa. Many of these peoples, like the Kamba and Kikuyu to their north, developed systems of age-set organisation and initiation ceremonies, which were probably borrowed in outline from earlier Cushitic neighbours.

Although the Tanzanian plateau was generally lightly populated, parts of the interior were rich in two important raw materials: iron and salt. These provided the basis for the development of regional trading networks. In the western region, the Nyamwezi in particular were, by the end of the eighteenth century, organising themselves as professional traders and ivory porters. From south of the Victoria Nyanza, they were well placed to develop long-distance trading routes between the inter-lake kingdoms and the east African coast. The trade in ivory and, later, slaves from the interior was to become an important feature of the region in the nineteenth century.

Farmers, fishers and hunters of the Congo forest

The basin of the Congo River contains Africa's largest area of tropical rainforest. But this does not mean that the whole region is covered

with unbroken galleries of dense vegetation. Apart from the navigable rivers, there are a number of upland areas where the forest is broken by clearings of savannah. The varied environment allowed the peoples of this region to develop a variety of productive activities, although basically they lived by farming, fishing or hunting. Some peoples practised all three activities, others specialised in one or two. The best-known specialist hunters were the short-statured peoples of the denser forest zones, ancestors of the modern Efe and Mbuti, often referred to by outsiders as ‘pygmies’.

Figure 14.3 Modern fishermen on the Congo River rapids at Wagenia Falls, Kisangani, still find the old technology effective.



Source: guenterguni/iStock.

All these occupations required a level of cooperative effort that was not always quite so important elsewhere in the continent. The farmers needed the intensive effort of cooperative labour for clearing forest, often starting from the edges of a natural clearing, or for building mounds in the areas liable to flood. Hunters needed cooperative work digging pits and trapping animals. Fishing peoples joined together for building dams and netting rivers. The staple crops were bananas in the forest and millet or sorghum in the savannah clearings. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the latter were largely replaced by the American imports of maize and cassava, introduced into the region by the Portuguese.

On the whole, the people of the Congo forest lived in villages of

between 30 and 200 adults. Any smaller would have left the people short of labour and any larger would have put too great a pressure on the natural resources of a region. The adults within a village were usually related, and exchange of brides from one village to another provided the basis of relationships between the two. Women, the main cultivators, were subservient to men but, within villages, there were also captives or hostages who were, in effect, slaves. In addition, some villages exercised a system of clientship over specialists like Efe or Mbuti hunters who provided farming communities with meat in exchange for cultivated food.

River transport provided the key to trade between regions, and specialist craftsmen built a range of river canoes. At the downstream end of thousands of kilometres of navigable waterway lay Malebo Pool, which became a major trading junction.

Within the forest proper there were few large states, although there was a wide range of relationships between various villages. The most common linkages within a group of villages were alliances of marriage. Others were held together by a war leader, a common language or a religious cult. Where kingdoms did develop, it was generally in the forest clearings, such as the Kuba in the mid-Kasai region, Loango on the coast or the Tio, north of Malebo Pool. It was usually these kingdoms that provided the link with the slave trade of the coast.

West-central Africa in the era of the slave trade

In the 1480s, the Portuguese arrived off the coast of west-central Africa near the mouth of the Congo River. They soon established diplomatic relations with the king of Kongo, who welcomed the foreign connection. He hoped the Portuguese would supply teachers and craftsmen to educate and train his people. He also wanted new weapons and Portuguese mercenaries to strengthen his army. The Portuguese, for their part, were delighted to form an alliance with what they considered to be a powerful African kingdom. They hoped it would provide them with a profitable trade in gold, copper, silver and spices. But they were soon disappointed. The kingdom could export a small amount of copper and local manufactured goods such as raffia cloth for resale elsewhere along the African coast. But it was not rich in the kind of minerals and spices that the Portuguese really sought. The most valuable resource in the basically agricultural economy of west-central Africa was the region's labour.

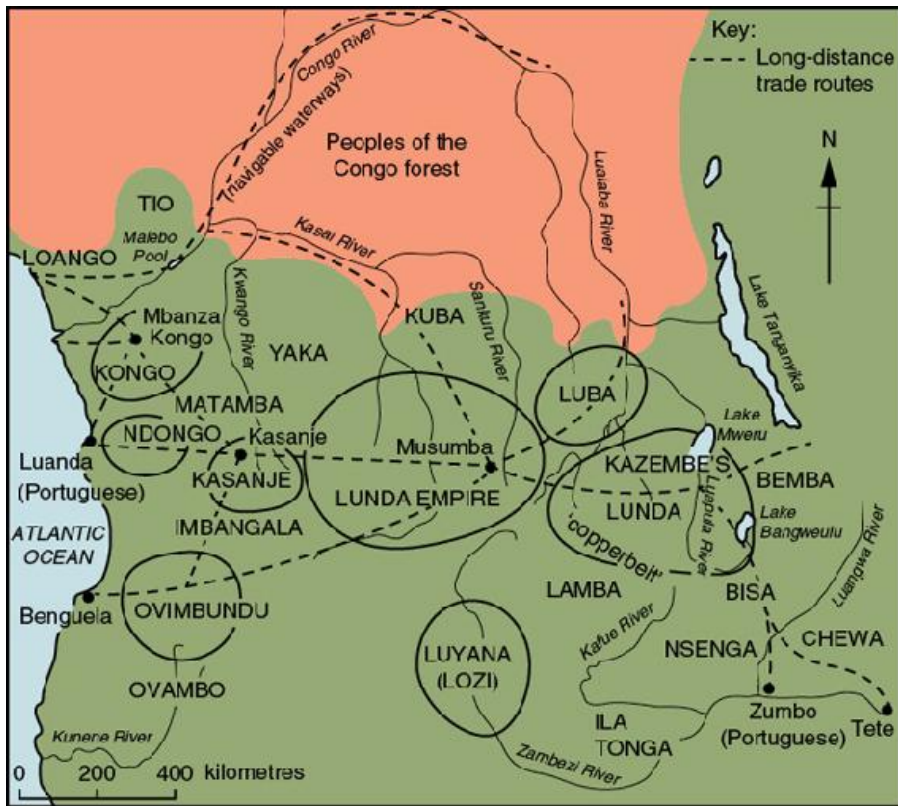
The Kingdom of Kongo

The Portuguese presence on the coast stimulated a dynastic dispute within the Kingdom of Kongo between those in favour of greater foreign contacts and those against. The former emerged victorious, with Portuguese help, and in 1506, a Kongolese Christian convert seized the throne and took the title Afonso I (r. 1506–42).

Afonso trusted the sincerity of the Portuguese and exchanged letters with his 'brother monarch', the king of Portugal. He also opened communication with the pope in Rome. Within Kongo, Afonso developed Christianity along the lines of a royal religious cult, thus increasing his own authority and undermining that of regional religious leaders. On the one hand, this reduced his need to cultivate local regional support as the basis of his power, but on the other hand, this made him a more autocratic ruler, who now became heavily dependent on the support of the Portuguese. Afonso used Portuguese mercenaries and guns to exert direct control over tribute collection and long-distance trade, and he expanded the kingdom by conquest as far as Malebo Pool. Afonso's wars of conquest produced a number of captives, who were sold to the Portuguese for export to São Tomé as slaves. In exchange, Afonso imported Portuguese priests, soldiers and metal manufactured goods.

For a while, the Portuguese government was undecided as to whether it should continue to treat Kongo as a friendly ally or simply exploit the region as a source of slaves. The Portuguese settlers of São Tomé had no such doubts. They even promoted local wars of resistance to Afonso in order to increase the supply of captives. With the development of the transatlantic trade from the 1530s, there was further pressure on the king of Kongo to produce more captives for export.

In 1568–9, the Kingdom of Kongo suffered an invasion from the east. The invaders, known as the Jaga, quickly overran the kingdom, laying waste the country and forcing the king into exile. There has been much historical dispute in recent years as to who exactly the Jaga were and why they invaded Kongo in 1568. It seems probable that a period of prolonged drought had prompted the settled farming peoples of the Kwango River region to resort to a life of raid and devastation. They may also have been reacting to increasingly heavy Kongolese demands for tribute or raids for slaves.



In 1574, the Kongo king, Alvaro I, was reinstated by the Portuguese with the aid of São Tomé mercenaries. But thereafter the king's authority among his people declined. He became ever-more dependent on the export of captives in exchange for Portuguese military support. Dutch competition in the seventeenth century stimulated a further expansion in the demand for captives at the coast. Professional African and Afro-European slavers at Malebo Pool developed an alternative northern slave route between the Kongolese interior and the Atlantic coast. They became known as *pombeiros*, after the Malebo port of Pumbo. Later, the name *pombeiro* came to be used as a general term for most of the professional traders of west-central Africa. During the course of the seventeenth century, central authority in Kongo collapsed and the kingdom disintegrated into rival regional factions, each fighting one another in the pursuit of war captives.

Angola and the slave trade

From the 1530s, São Tomé developed as a major transit point for captives being transported across the Atlantic to the new plantations in Brazil. This entailed a hugely increased demand for slaves, so the

São Tomé slavers evaded Portuguese royal control, and thus taxation, by establishing a slaving station at Luanda, on the coast 350 kilometres south of the mouth of the Congo. From there, they purchased captives from the *Ngola* ('king') of Ndongo, the southern rival kingdom to Kongo. The trade in captives from Ndongo strengthened the power of the *Ngola* during the course of the sixteenth century. The *Ngola* built up his army and expanded his kingdom by conquest in order to produce more captives for sale.

The Jaga invasion of Kongo had shown the Portuguese the precariousness of their position in the west-central African interior. Their subsequent relatively easy defeat of the Jaga encouraged them to take more direct control of the region. The rumour that there were rich deposits of silver in the mountains around the upper Kwanza led the Portuguese to try and conquer the Kingdom of Ndongo (modern Angola).

The Portuguese invasion of Angola was defeated by a combination of stiff resistance by the Mbundu and the tropical diseases that decimated the Portuguese troops. As the invasion ground to a halt in the late 1580s, the remnants of the Portuguese army settled into the role of regular slave traders. The endemic warfare of the interior, stimulated by the Portuguese invasion, increased the supply of captives to the coast. Portuguese and Afro-European dealers, based at Luanda and later further south at Benguela, ensured that the Angolan interior became a regular source of slaves for the Atlantic trade for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the mid-eighteenth century, Luanda alone was exporting more than 10,000 captives a year. If any part of Africa was dominated by the slave trade in this period, it was here in Angola. All the worst effects of the slave trade described in [Chapter 12](#) could be applied to this region.

From the seventeenth century, persistent Mbundu resistance, organised by leaders such as Queen Ndzinga, *Ngola* of Ndongo (1624–63) ensured that Portuguese settlement was confined to Luanda and other coastal enclaves (see [Figure 14.4](#)). Portuguese-supported slave raids continued, but by mid-century, they had given up attempts to conquer the interior. There was no need, since the incessant wars of the region provided them with all the captives they needed. (They would not return to conquest until the late nineteenth century.) Portuguese attempts to tax the slave trade at the coastal ports merely encouraged coastal dealers to sell to other European trading ships, especially Dutch, French and English. The sale of large quantities of cheap French and English guns in the eighteenth century further increased the level of interior warfare and the sale of captives at the coast. Other principal imports in exchange for captives from Angola

were Indian cottons and Brazilian rum. Imports such as these helped destroy indigenous African craft and industry.

Figure 14.4 Queen Ndzinga, *Ngola* of Ndongo (1624–63) and queen of Matamba (1629–63), negotiating with the Portuguese governor of Luanda on behalf of her brother *Ngola* in 1622. The Portuguese had refused her a seat, so she sat on the back of one of her attendants to indicate that the *Ngola* of Ndongo was of the same status as the king of Portugal. Ndzinga spent most of her life fighting wars of resistance against the Portuguese.



Source: Fotosearch/Stringer/Getty Images.

Within the Angolan interior, various branches of Imbangala were active in the supply of captives for the coastal market. Dislocated from the central highlands through drought and warfare, Imbangala invaded the coastal lowlands in the 1570s and 80s. After an initial period of raiding, many settled down to farming again. Others became regular slave-raiding mercenaries for the Portuguese at Luanda. Further Imbangala formed the raiding state of Kasanje, which became a major source of slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The peoples of the Angolan interior continued to be dominated by the wars of the slave trade until well into the nineteenth century.

In the early nineteenth century, the Portuguese governor of Luanda dispatched two *pombeiros* to investigate the trading prospects of the

central African interior. They traversed the continent, following well-established trade routes, which led to the capitals of the Lunda empires of Mwata Yamvo and Kazembe. These states had grown to dominate the long-distance trade of the interior during the course of the previous century.

Central African empires and the growth of trade

The Lunda of Mwata Yamvo

The Lunda Empire of Mwata Yamvo reached its height in the second half of the seventeenth century. By then it had fathered many offshoots to the south and west such as the Imbangala kingdom of Kasanje in Angola. The latter provided a trading link with the Atlantic coast that was to gain in importance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

An important factor in the growth of the Lunda Empire was the adoption of new American crops, maize and cassava, imported indirectly from the Portuguese on the Atlantic coast. In the dry savannah zones, cassava rapidly became a major staple crop, displacing the indigenous African millet. Cassava was found to be heavy yielding, drought-resistant and good for storage. It enabled the production of greater food surpluses, which added stability to the heartland of the Lunda Empire.

The power of the Mwata Yamvo ('Lord of Vipers', the title taken from the name of the founder of the Lunda dynasty) was based on the collection and redistribution of tribute, which in turn stimulated the development of long-distance trade. Near the capital, Musumba, tribute was paid in food, especially cassava, while further afield the chiefdoms of the empire paid in a variety of regionally specialised goods. These included salt, iron, copper, metal manufactured goods, raffia cloth, baskets, pottery and ivory.

The Mwata Yamvo used this tribute to redistribute as gifts to supporters or to exchange with other peoples for luxuries and essentials. As long-distance trade developed, two key items exported to the west were ivory and slaves, in exchange for woollen cloth and guns. The possession of guns helped the Mwata Yamvo to further extend his control over the trade and tribute of the region. Although the central African Lunda were thus drawn into the slave-trading system of the south Atlantic, this was never on the massively destructive scale found in Angola.

During the course of the seventeenth century, Lunda tribute

collectors established chiefdoms to the south, east and west of the central Lunda kingdom. Here, they asserted authority over the local 'owners of the land', whom they taxed for tribute to send to the Mwata Yamvo. The most important of these new Lunda states was that of Kazembe.

The Lunda of Kazembe

In the early eighteenth century, the Mwata Yamvo sent a small force of Lunda to capture the salt pans of the upper Lualaba River. Their leader was given the title *Kazembe* with authority to extend the collection of Lunda tribute eastwards to the copper-producing region of the modern Zambia/Congo copperbelt. His successor, Kazembe II, extended Lunda authority further east until, by 1740, he had established a new state in the valley of the lower Luapula River (see [Map 14.2](#)). During the second half of the eighteenth century, this new Lunda state expanded into an independent empire in its own right, paying only nominal tribute to the Mwata Yamvo.

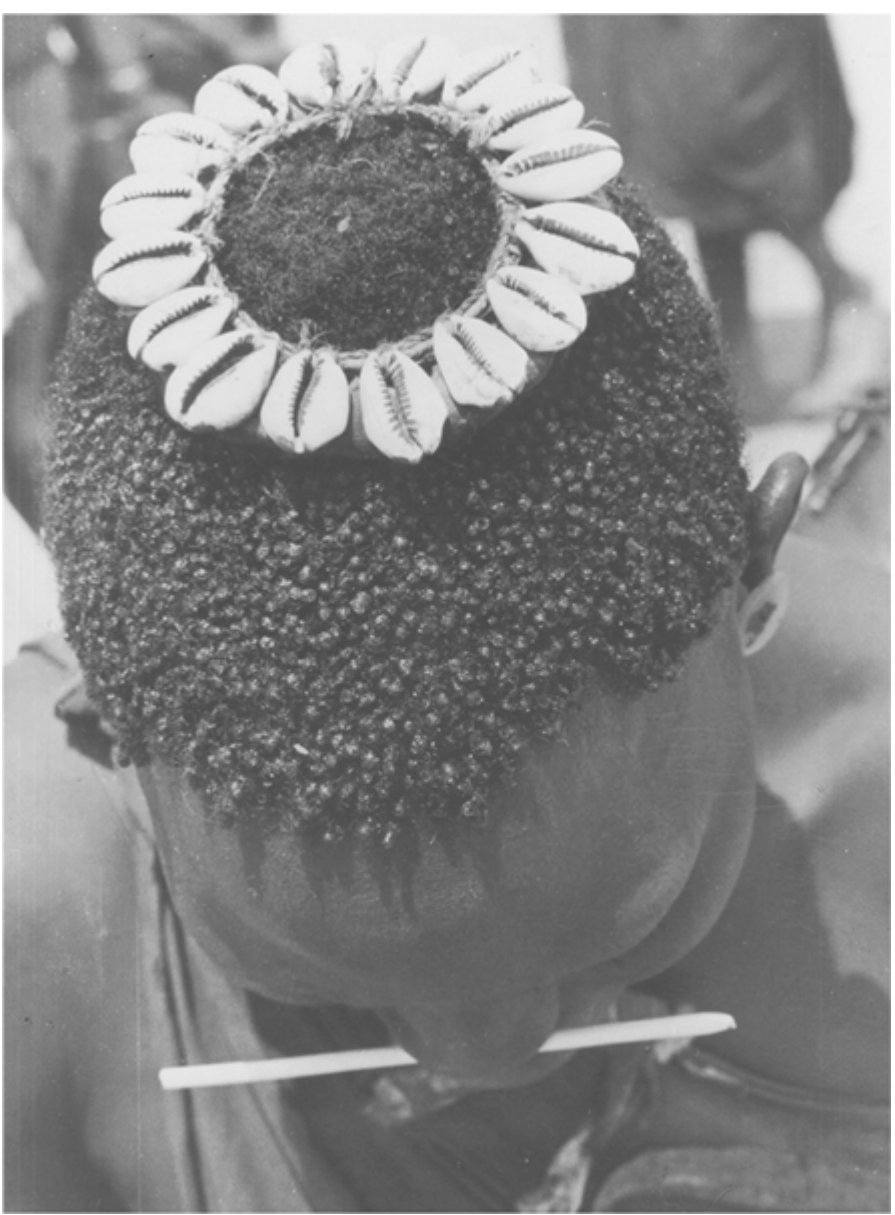
The wealth of Kazembe's empire came from the rich natural resources of the region combined with his control over a well-organised, long-distance trading system. Like the Mwata Yamvos, the Kazembes left the 'owners of the land' in place but sent out tribute collectors to secure the surplus products of the region. These items were then turned to profitable, long-distance trade. And the Kazembes were even better placed than the Mwata Yamvo to take advantage of this system. In the centre of the kingdom, the fertile alluvial soils of the Luapula valley ensured the regular production of cassava and maize. To the northwest, salt was brought in from the upper Lualaba River, while copper came from the Shaba region of the copperbelt. A surplus of fish was produced from the Luapula and Lake Mweru, and tribute in iron was provided by specialist ironworkers in the east of his kingdom.

By 1800, Kazembe III's capital was at the centre of a vast trans-African trading network. Unlike the Mwata Yamvo, Kazembe was able to make use of both Atlantic and Indian Ocean systems. The main exports were iron, salt, copper, ivory and, later, slaves. These were sent westwards via Mwata Yamvo's empire and southeastwards via Bisa middlemen to the Portuguese of the Zambezi valley (see [Map 14.2](#)). The main imports were European woollens and guns, Indian cottons, glass beads and luxury manufactured goods for use at Kazembe's court.

The Maravi Empire of Kalonga

We saw in [Chapter 9](#) that, by the sixteenth century, the Maravi chiefdoms of modern southern Malawi were organised under three principal ruling dynasties. The most senior of these, the Kalonga, was centred among the Chinyanja-speaking peoples around the southern end of Lake Malawi (see [Map 14.3](#)). To their south, the Manganja of the Shire valley were ruled by the Lunda dynasty, while further west the Chewa came under the Undi dynasty. Like the Lunda, they were, in effect, federations of chiefdoms who remained the ‘owners of the land’. The kingship of the dynasties was recognised through the payment of tribute, mainly in food.

Figure 14.5 Cowrie shells (from the Indian Ocean) were widely used as currency in Africa from the sixteenth century, but by the end of the nineteenth century their value as a currency had collapsed and they were used only for decoration, as worn by this Tonga girl of the Zambezi valley, c.1900.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The Maravi were important manufacturers and exporters of iron, while the valleys of the Zambezi and Shire Rivers provided them with important sources of ivory.

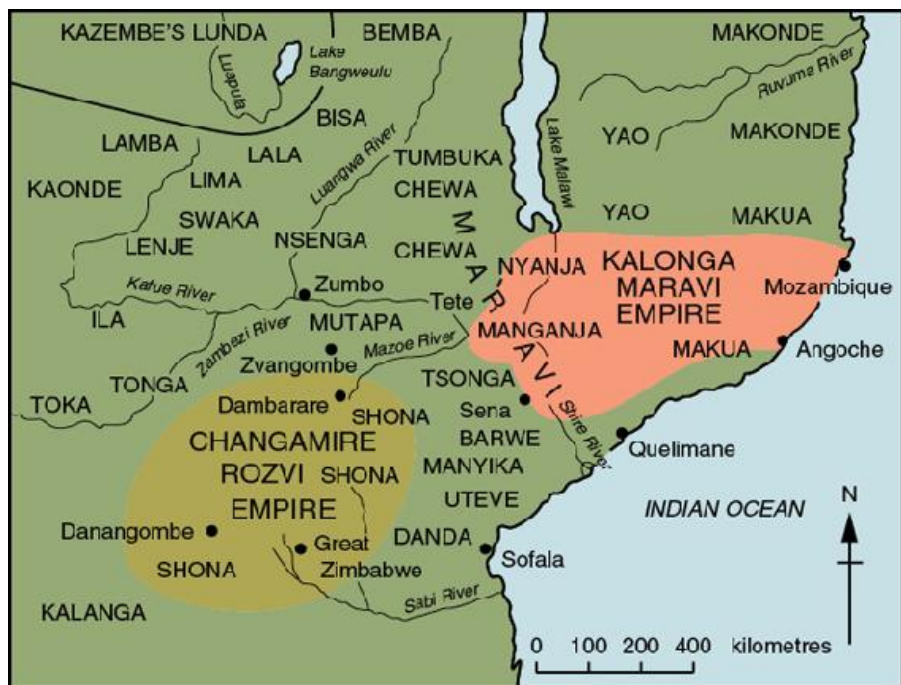
During the late sixteenth century, the Portuguese tried to establish a monopoly on the ivory trade in the Zambezi valley. This provoked a violent reaction from the Lundu of the Shire valley. In the 1580s and 90s, the massed armies of the Lundu, known as 'wa-Zimba', sacked Sena and Tete and raided other Portuguese trading towns, spreading

terror among the peoples of the northern Mozambique coast. The exact origins of the wa-Zimba remain the subject of historical debate. The most likely explanation is that they were a mercenary band of refugees, possibly recently escaped from Portuguese slavery in the Zambezi valley, who put themselves at the disposal of the Lundu. The devastating invasions of the wa-Zimba may also have been prompted by the same extensive drought that dislocated the Imbangala of Angola at this time.

In the early seventeenth century, Kalonga Masula (r. 1600–50) reasserted authority over the Lundu kingdom and re-established peaceful ivory trading with the Portuguese. During his reign, Kalonga Masula built a powerful Maravi Empire, largely by military conquest. By 1635, Kalonga's empire stretched from the Zambezi in the west to Mozambique Island in the east. He had even tried extending his authority south of the Zambezi by invading Mutapa in 1623. Although he was forced to withdraw his army, he left with a large booty in gold. Kalonga Masula's rule was strong enough to ensure that the Portuguese did not interfere with his domination of the ivory trade north of the Zambezi.

Kalonga's Maravi Empire, however, went into gradual decline after its founder's death in 1650. He had failed to set up an effective central administration, relying too much on the energy of his personal leadership and the strength of his standing army. Chiefdoms asserted their independence, and the Yao from the east of Lake Malawi took over the main ivory trading routes between the Shire valley and the eastern coastal ports of Mozambique and Kilwa. The lack of any powerful Maravian authority in the eighteenth century left the way open for the penetration of the violent slaving caravans, which raided and captured as well as transported slaves from the east coast, and slave raids from the Zambezi valley of the early nineteenth century (see [Chapter 19](#)).

The Maravi and Rozvi: seventeenth and eighteenth centuries



The Changamire Rozvi of the Zimbabwe plateau

During the course of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese gained increasing control within the Mutapa Empire. The Mutapa's authority had been weakened by the Maravi invasion of 1623 and by succession disputes and civil war in the years that followed. Portuguese settlers (*prazeros*) from the Zambezi valley intervened in the civil war in exchange for the removal of restrictions on their mining and trading within the Mutapa Empire. Between 1630 and 1670, they set up a number of trading fairs and tried forcing the local people to open up new gold mines. The violent oppression of the Portuguese provoked widespread resistance from the local peasant population. Rather than work the gold mines, people fled their villages and sought the protection of powerful local cattle owners and their private militias.

The increasing level of violence in the late seventeenth century prompted the development of private armies within the remnants of the Mutapa state. Basically, the poor sought the protection of the rich, and those who owned large herds of cattle attracted dependants into military service. Young men from poor families offered themselves for a number of years of military service in exchange for enough cattle to pay the bride price for a later marriage. Wealthy cattle owners were thus able to build up private armies to protect their own cattle and grazing lands and to raid those of their neighbours as well as to resist

the Portuguese.

One such wealthy cattle owner, Dombo, who possessed a private army, acquired the title 'Changamire'. He was reputed to have originally been a herdsman of the Munhumutapa. By the 1670s, he was an important power in the northeast of the plateau region, rivalling that of the Munhumutapa. His highly disciplined and well-trained army were known as *rozvi* ('the destroyers'), and, in time, this became the proud title of the people of his empire. In the early 1680s, Changamire led his army, herds of cattle and increasing body of dependants in an invasion of the southwest. He defeated the Torwa rulers of Guruswa (or Butua), and took over their capital Danangombe.

Between 1684 and 1696, Changamire Dombo used his ruthlessly efficient army to expel the Portuguese from their trading fairs in Mutapa and Manyika, and made his Rozvi 'empire' the dominant power of the Zimbabwe plateau. Mutapa became a minor state in the lowland northeast towards the Zambezi valley. The Portuguese of Sena and Tete were only saved by the death of Changamire Dombo in 1696. Dombo may have set up a dynasty, but there were numerous potential claimants to wear the title 'Changamire'. During the succession dispute that followed, the Rozvi armies were withdrawn from the Zambezi valley.

Through the 1970s and 80s, there was some dispute among historians about the power and nature of the Rozvi state, in particular whether it warranted being referred to as an 'empire'. The latter title implies some degree of direct administration and control over a range of disparate peoples. The general consensus is now that the extent of the Rozvi's power in the past may have been exaggerated. It is not disputed that the Changamire dynasty were the most powerful rulers on the plateau during the eighteenth century and were able to extract tribute from the majority of Shona chiefdoms, but this is not quite the same as achieving the status of an administrative 'empire'.

The power of the Changamire dynasty was based on a number of factors. Not least of these was the discipline and reputation of the Rozvi regiments. Their presence or threatened use guaranteed the payment of tribute by the various Shona chiefdoms. They were also used to tend and protect the Changamire's huge herds of cattle. Special government officials known as *banyamai* regularly toured the country, backed up by small military regiments. They collected tribute from the regions and approved or disapproved the succession of local Shona chiefs. Tribute was mostly in food, cattle, skins – the products of subsistence farmers – or game trophies such as ivory.

The mining and trading of gold was kept strictly under royal

control and this helped prevent the Portuguese from regaining access to the gold trade of the region. No Portuguese were allowed within the empire. They were restricted to their landholdings (*prazos*) and trading posts in the Zambezi valley. In the eighteenth century, the Portuguese were allowed to establish a small trading post at Zumbo, but only their African agents (*vashambadzi*) were allowed into the Rozvi state to trade at the Changamire's capital. Here, gold dust was exchanged for imported cloth and beads. Much of the country's gold, however, was crafted by local goldsmiths into jewellery for the royal court. Although gold and the control of its trade was an important source of the Changamire's power, the basis of the Shona economy remained cattle, hunting and subsistence agriculture.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the goldfields were almost completely worked out and with the decline in the gold trade came a weakening of the wealth and power of the Changamire dynasty. At this point, the dynasty suffered a succession dispute that led to a prolonged civil war waged from 1795 to the 1820s. Trade virtually ceased and the Rozvi state was seriously weakened. It was in no condition to repel the series of attacks from Nguni and Sotho militarised groups that plundered their way northward in the early 1830s, killing the last Changamire in 1836. With most of their cattle plundered and no Changamire to provide effective leadership, the way was left open for Mzilikazi's Ndebele who migrated into western Zimbabwe in 1839–40.

Figure 14.6 Precolonial mining in central Africa in the 1890s. This illustrated the techniques of digging out the ore, loading it into baskets, winnowing the ore to drive off the dust, and washing it in the river to separate out the metal.





Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.



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CHAPTER 15

Southern Africa to the eighteenth century

Southern Africa before 1650

As we saw in [Chapter 9](#), by the seventeenth century, southern Africa had for some centuries been witnessing the development of Later Iron Age states and societies. In the northwest, Ovambo farmers and Herero cattle herders already occupied the northern half of present-day Namibia. The central highveld to the east of the Kalahari Desert was dominated by the distinctive ancestral Sotho-Tswana lineage groups, which were to spread and develop into the nineteenth-century states of Tswana, northern Sotho and southern Sotho (see [Map 9.3](#)). To the east of the Drakensberg, the Nguni-speaking people were organised into many small, clan-based chiefdoms in the valleys and foothills of the southeastern lowveld. The clans and chiefdoms of Khoesan pastoralists were to be found in southern Namibia and all over the southwestern Cape, interspersed with hunter-gatherers. The latter were also still to be found in small family-sized groups among the Sotho-Tswana of the southern highveld and the Nguni east of the Drakensberg. The southernmost Nguni, the Xhosa, in particular were mingling with Khoesan sheep and cattle herders in the Fish River region to form new Khoe/Xhosa chiefdoms such as the Gona and Gqunukhwebe (see [Map 15.1](#)).

Most of these southern African societies were more or less self-sufficient, although there was always a certain amount of inter-regional trade. The Khoesan of the southwest, for instance, received copper and iron from the Tswana to their north. Some of these metals were passed on to the Xhosa in exchange for dagga and local tobacco. The Xhosa, who were not themselves smelters, received most of their iron from the central Nguni to their northeast. The northern Nguni

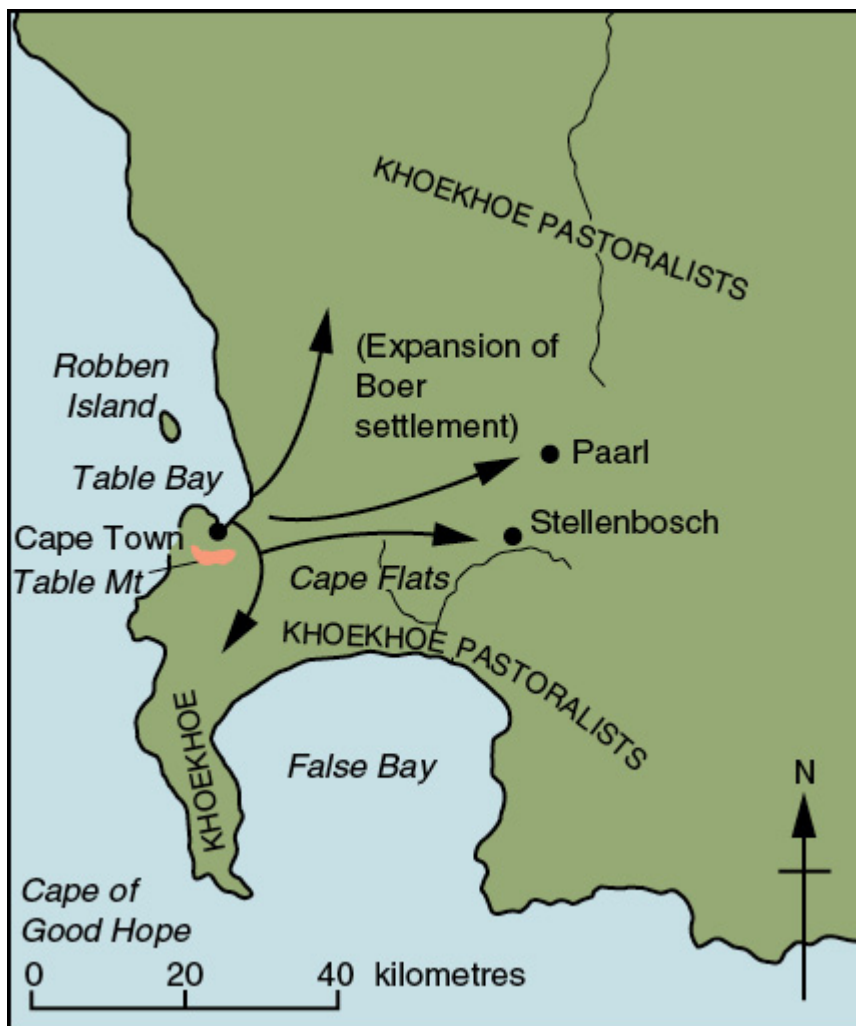
and Tsonga of southern Mozambique, meanwhile, sold ivory and furs to Portuguese traders at Delagoa Bay in exchange for beads and other luxuries, which were, in due course, traded on into the wider regional network.

The early Cape Colony: white settlement and Khoesan resistance, 1650–1770

Foundation of the Cape Colony

During the sixteenth century, European sailing ships, mainly Dutch and English, began making regular voyages round the southern tip of Africa to trade in India, southeast Asia and Indonesia (known to Europeans as ‘the East Indies’). The southwestern Cape of Good Hope was about halfway on this long sea voyage, and by the seventeenth century, Table Bay had developed into a regular port of call for ships needing to replenish their supplies of fresh water and meat from local Khoesan herdsman.

Southwestern Cape, 1650–1700



It has been estimated that by the mid-seventeenth century, there were up to 50,000 Khoesan pastoralists living southwest of the Olifants and Breede Rivers (see [Map 15.2](#)). Those clans living nearest Table Bay ([Figure 15.1](#)) at first welcomed the new trading opportunity as they were able to sell off their ‘surplus’ old and sick animals in exchange for iron, copper, tobacco and beads. Peaceable trading soon turned to conflict, however, as the Khoesan asked for higher prices and the Europeans turned to raiding. (See [Chapter 10](#) to learn the fate of at least one European ship’s captain who attacked the Khoesan in this way.)

Figure 15.1 Khoesan–European trading at Table Bay, seventeenth century. The peaceable trading pictured here was very far from the norm.



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg, A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile, Begunne Anno 1626 by Sir Thomas Herbert (1634).

The Dutch East India Company, the Dutch trading monopoly, sought to solve these problems by founding a small permanent settlement, led by Jan van Riebeeck, on the southern shores of Table Bay in 1652. It hoped this would regularise the meat trade with the Khoesan and so keep prices down. At the same time, the settlement would grow fresh fruit and vegetables for its ships and provide a hospital for sick sailors. The Dutch intended to monopolise the provisioning trade at the Cape and so profit from selling supplies to ships from other European nations. A fortress manned by company soldiers was built to protect the settlement from attacks by rival European shipping.

Early Boer settlement and Khoesan reaction

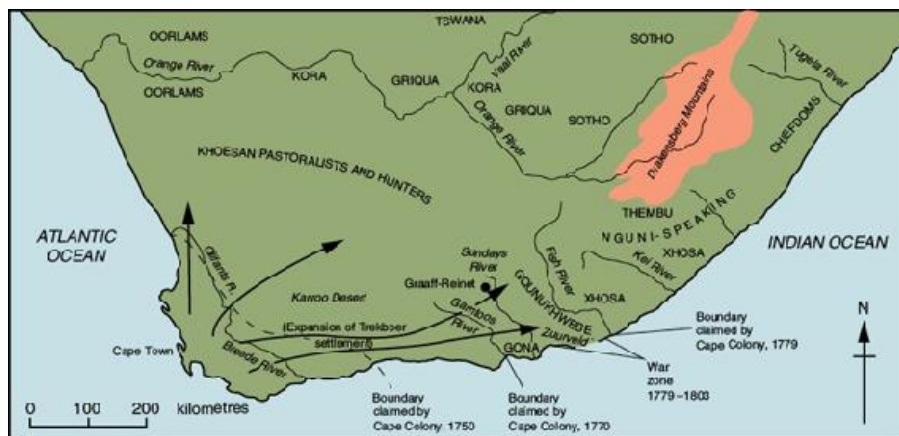
The Khoesan of the southwestern Cape, who had initially welcomed trading contact with passing ships, quickly regretted the presence of a permanent white settlement at the Cape. The Dutch East India Company demanded far more cattle than the natural surplus the Khoesan were prepared to sell. In exchange for what was the economic basis of the Khoesan livelihood, the company was only prepared to offer luxuries such as copper, beads, tobacco and alcohol.

Iron was quickly dropped as a trading item in case the Khoesan made it into spears to turn against the white settlement, and guns were never offered for sale for the same reason. When the Khoesan would not willingly sell their livestock under these terms, their cattle were seized, often on some flimsy pretext such as the theft of some tobacco.

Furthermore, it was not long before the company began releasing some of its soldiers from their contracts and allowing them to set up as independent free burghers (free citizens of the colony). Most of these established themselves as 'Boers' (the Dutch word for farmer), initially on Khoesan grazing land along the Cape Peninsula south of Cape Town ([Map 15.2](#)).

Faced with an expansion of white settlement onto their traditional summer grazing lands, however, the Khoesan managed to unite in armed opposition in 1659. They quickly learned the limitations of the Europeans' primitive muzzle-loading guns and drove the free burghers back to the protection of their fortress. But, despite several brave attempts, the Khoesan were unable to overrun the fortress itself. After months of stalemate and a complete suspension of trade, the Khoesan alliance fell apart and their leaders were forced to come to terms. Van Riebeeck recorded in his journal the minutes of his meeting with the Khoesan leaders:

The expansion of Boer settlement in the eighteenth century



They spoke for a long time about our taking every day for our own use more of the land which had belonged to them from all ages, and on which they were accustomed to pasture their cattle. They also asked whether, if they were to come to Holland, they would be

permitted to act in a similar manner, saying, 'it would not matter if you stayed at the Fort, but you come into the interior, selecting the best land for yourselves, and never once asking whether we like it, or whether it will put us to any inconvenience.' They therefore insisted very strenuously that they should again be allowed free access to the pasture. They objected that there was not enough grass for both their cattle and ours. 'Are we not right therefore to prevent you from getting any more cattle? For, if you get many cattle, you come and occupy our pasture with them, and then say the land is not wide enough for us both! Who, then, with the greatest degree of justice, should give way, the natural owner, or the foreign invader?' They insisted so much on this point that we told them they had now lost that land in war, and therefore could not expect to get it back. It was our intention to keep it. ¹

Thus, claiming 'right of conquest', van Riebeeck simply overrode all Khoesan protests and the free burghers remained in occupation of the Cape Peninsula. Thereafter, successive company commanders and the free burghers themselves simply assumed that all Khoesan land, no matter where it be, was 'empty land' and theirs to take freely.

The main significance of the Dutch settlement at the Cape was that it was not simply like the incursion of another powerful pastoral group. The establishment of a European export market at the Cape steadily drained the region of its indigenous livestock. This, in turn, stimulated the company's traders, and raiders, into ever-deeper penetration of the interior. To do so, the company exploited age-old rivalries between Khoesan clans, turning them against each other for the sake of the cattle captured as booty. The brief Khoesan unity of 1659–60 was never recaptured in the struggle that followed. The second Khoe–Dutch War of 1673–7 was mainly a series of cattle raids, as company officers persuaded impoverished Khoesan clans to unite with them in attacking the powerful Cochoqua clan who had rejected the company's trading approaches. The war concluded, leaving the Cochoqua weakened and the company with a large booty of cattle and sheep.

The expansion of white settlement: farmers and trekboers

Following the second Khoe–Dutch War, settlement of free burgher Boers expanded rapidly. Moving across the Cape Flats, they settled the favourable agricultural valleys of present-day Paarl and Stellenbosch. Direct immigration was promoted by the company during the 1680s and 90s, and in the early eighteenth century the white population

reached 1,000. By then, the colony was growing enough wheat to feed itself and sell a surplus for export. The free burghers' other crops included fruit, especially grapes for wine. Their main source of farm labour was slaves imported from Madagascar, Mozambique and Indonesia. For much of the eighteenth century, slaves were imported at the rate of 200–300 a year until, by the end of the century, they numbered 25,000 compared with a total white population of 21,000.

White agricultural settlement was necessarily confined to the moist, fertile valleys nearest the Cape and it was not from them that the main territorial threat to Khoesan survival came. By the early eighteenth century, the pastoral 'trekboer' had emerged as the spearhead of white settlement penetrating the interior. As the best agricultural land was bought up by the wealthiest free burghers and company officials, increasing numbers of Boers sought to make a living from pastoralism and hunting in the drier interior. They were called 'trekboers' from the Dutch word *trek*, meaning 'to pull (a wagon)', because, like other pastoralists, they were so often on the move, for much of the time living in or camping next to their ox-drawn wagons. The company allowed them to claim huge 'farms' of 2,500 hectares or more; and as these were grazed out, they moved on to new pastures. Each son, and they had huge families, regarded it as his birthright to claim his own farm when he reached adulthood. In this way, trekboer settlement expanded rapidly (see [Map 15.2](#)). And they stocked their farms with sheep and cattle, often traded or raided from their Khoesan rivals.



For more on the impact of the new arrivals on the Khoesan peoples, and how historians have covered the subject, see 'Khoesan and the Cape Colony' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

Patterns of resistance: the loss of Khoesan independence

Faced with the challenge of rapid trekboer expansion, the Khoesan followed one or more of three basic courses of action: direct military resistance, withdrawal into the interior or acceptance of a subservient position within Boer society. From the start, the Khoesan were at a

serious disadvantage and some moved through all three courses of action in succession. Apart from the Boers' superior weaponry of horse and gun, the Khoesan of the southwestern Cape were nearly wiped out altogether by a series of smallpox epidemics brought to the Cape aboard European ships. The first of these occurred in 1713. Lacking any natural immunity to the disease, thousands of Khoesan perished, especially among those nearest Cape Town.

Figure 15.2 A Khoesan family dismantling their home and loading it onto oxen for transportation to a new site. To the right, the pole framework is being dismantled, while, centre foreground, a reed mat is being bound before being loaded onto the oxen. Unusually, in this picture, the woman is sitting doing nothing. In reality, this is most unlikely. Painting by English artist Samuel Daniell, who was at the Cape, 1801–3.



Source: *Historical Picture Archive/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images.*

Direct military resistance usually took the form of a kind of guerrilla warfare. Deprived of their pastoral livelihood, stockless Khoesan took the traditional course of reverting to full-time hunter-gathering, only this time they were more like hunter-raiders, preying on the livestock of the Boers who had dispossessed them. The trekboers countered by forming local voluntary militia groups generally known as 'commandos'. In the frontier districts of the

colony, mounted commandos used speed, treachery and ambushes to hunt Khoesan 'Bushmen' to near-extirmination. The weakness of the commando system was that it left Boer farms and families unprotected and so commandos could seldom afford to spend long in the field. And as the commandos disbanded, the Khoesan renewed their attacks. In parts of the northeastern Cape, Khoesan resistance prevented effective trekboer settlement for much of the eighteenth century.

A plausible alternative to direct military resistance was withdrawal into the interior, beyond the boundaries of the expanding colony. Many Khoesan who tried this at first were soon overtaken by the advancing frontier of white settlement. But the main line of trekboer advance was eastwards. Thus, by withdrawing far enough north, several groups of Khoesan – the Kora, the Oorlams and the Griqua – were able to retain some degree of independence (see [Map 15.2](#)). A number of these peoples were of mixed Khoe, slave and European parentage but had found themselves rejected by colonial society. Some of their leaders were fugitives from colonial justice, such as the German Jan Bloem who headed a group of Kora raiders along the middle Orange River, and Jager Afrikaner who escaped to the Orange River to lead a group of Oorlams hunter-traders and raiders.

Figure 15.3 Griqua men riding oxen, early nineteenth century. By that time, most Griqua hunters used guns, rode horses and drove ox-drawn wagons in which they lived when on a hunting trip. The artist here may have been capturing what by then were merely 'traditional' Griqua hunting methods.



Source: Museum Africa, City of Johannesburg.

Gradually, during the course of the eighteenth century, more and more Khoesans resigned themselves to their loss of economic and political independence. By agreeing to work for the Boers, especially as herdsmen and hunters, they retained some access to land. Although paid very little, if anything, for their labour, they were usually allowed to keep a few animals of their own. But with the loss of Khoesan independence went the loss of their cultural roots and even their language as they adopted the clothing, Dutch language and other cultural trappings of their 'masters'. Many served alongside Boers on commando raids against other Khoesans and, in due course, against the Xhosa.

One of the commonest sources of Khoesan servants were 'orphaned' children captured on commando raids in which their parents had been shot. These were shared out among the commandos as 'apprentices' and forced to work as unpaid servants until well into adult life. After that, they had nowhere else to go. Indeed, 'apprenticeship' was such an important source of trekboer slave labour that it was often reason enough for going on commando raids against the Khoesans. It was a system a later generation of Boers carried onto the highveld in the nineteenth century and pursued with the utmost vigour.

No matter how thoroughly Khoesans were absorbed into Boer society, they remained part of a servile class, never allowed the full

rights of citizens (burghers) of the colony. As such, they were lumped together with freed slaves and people of mixed Khoe, slave and European ancestry. It was during the nineteenth century that white colonists began referring to this whole Dutch-speaking Khoesan, freed slave and mixed race servile population as 'Cape Coloured'.

Conflict on the Cape/Xhosa frontier

The eastern advance of trekboer settlement reached the westernmost territory of the Xhosa by the late 1760s (see [Map 15.2](#)). Contact between colonists and the southernmost Nguni had been gradually building up during the course of the eighteenth century. Even before 1700, reports reached the Cape of a fertile, well-watered land, rich in cattle and populated by black people, which lay to the east of the Great Fish River. The Xhosa, too, soon heard of the presence of white settlers in the far southwestern Cape, but they did not view their presence there with undue alarm. They saw the new white colonists as fellow pastoralists who, like the Khoesan, could, in due course, be absorbed into an expanding Xhosa society. One of the earliest points of direct contact between white colonists and Xhosa, in 1702, was tainted with violence as a party of 45 free burghers raided east of the Gamtoos, attacking a group of Xhosa and capturing several thousand Khoesan sheep and cattle. But conflict was not inevitable. During the course of the eighteenth century, a few notable trekboer individuals blended into Xhosa society, marrying Xhosa wives, polygamously in Xhosa fashion, and established important hunting and trading connections between the Xhosa and the colony.

The real conflict, which began in the 1770s, arose over land. The arrival of the first trekboer settlers onto grazing veld known as the 'Zuurveld' east of the Sundays River coincided with a period of further Xhosa expansion westwards. The importance of the Zuurveld was that it provided ideal summer grazing, but was not so good during autumn and winter. Pastoralists using the Zuurveld needed freedom to move their livestock between the summer grazing of the Zuurveld and the sweet winter grasses of the valleys or the hills to the north. At first, although the trekboers laid claim to vast estates as their 'farms', they only used a portion of them and Khoe/Xhosa pastoralists were able to continue grazing their livestock across the land as well. But, by the 1770s, trekboer expansion was no longer able to move eastwards because of the density of Xhosa settlement beyond the Fish River. The amount of unclaimed land between the original isolated Boer farms of the Zuurveld was thus soon used up. This situation quickly led to conflict as Boer and Khoe/Xhosa pastoralists accused each other of

stealing cattle and using each other's land.

In earlier conflict with Khoesan herders, trekboers had been able to take advantage of a general lack of Khoesan unity and the relatively small size of most Khoesan clans. The trekboer advance eastwards had built up a momentum between 1700 and 1760, which the Khoesan resisted but were unable to halt. The Xhosa, by contrast, had a much larger population with a more close-knit social organisation. Although often split by internal political disputes, the Xhosa showed a remarkable degree of unity and determination when their territory was threatened by expanding trekboer settlement. As such, they presented the colonists with a formidable opposition, which trekboer commandos alone were unable to overcome.

Unbeknown to the participants, the war that began in 1779 was only the first of what was to prove a long series of nine so-called 'Frontier Wars'. Fought between colonists and Xhosa, these were to continue on and off over much of the next 100 years. The first three Cape-Xhosa wars fought between 1779 and 1803 were inconclusive affairs, which left the Xhosa and their Khoe/Xhosa allies, the Gqunukhwebe, in possession of most of the Zuurveld.

States and societies of the southern African interior, 1600–1800

Namibia and northern Botswana

By 1500 CE, the pastoral Herero and agricultural Ovambo peoples had moved into northern Namibia from the Okavango region of southeastern Angola and northwestern Botswana. As their herds increased in size, the Herero moved their small clan-based settlements in search of new grazing territory. Skirting the coastal desert (see [Map 15.3](#)), they pressed southwards into the upland grasslands of central Namibia. To their east the closely related Mbanderu expanded towards the Ghanzi and Ngamiland region of present-day northwestern Botswana. Meanwhile, from southern Namibia, Khoe-speaking Nama clans were moving northwards with their flocks of fat-tailed sheep into the dry grasslands of the central highlands. The Kalahari and Namib Deserts prevented further expansion eastward or westward. During the eighteenth century, therefore, there was increasing competition between Nama and Herero for the scarce grazing resources of the central Namibian highlands. This conflict was to lead to a series of wars, which dominated much of the nineteenth-

century history of the territory.

The Kalahari itself was dry and sandy, a region of scattered thorn scrub and sparse seasonal grassveld. The lack of surface water made it unsuitable for cattle and it remained largely an inhospitable hunting veld. Peopled only by small groups of hunter-gatherers, it was crossed periodically by long-distance hunting and trading parties from the Griqua and Tswana of the south and east. North of the Kalahari during this period, agricultural peoples such as the Mbukushu, Subiya and Yei were being pushed ever further into the better watered Boteti, Okavango and Chobe regions of northern Botswana by the expansion of the emerging Lozi state of the upper Zambezi floodplain (see [Chapter 19](#)). There, they developed a specialised riverine lifestyle based mainly on hunting, fishing and the cultivation of millet.

The Tswana of the highveld

By the seventeenth century, the Sotho-Tswana east of the Kalahari had developed a number of distinctive Tswana chieftaincies. Their women cultivated sorghum, beans and pumpkins; but the importance of the male preserve of cattle keeping had become dominant. Much of the strength of a Tswana ruling lineage depended upon the number of cattle they controlled. Apart from the wealth, political power and status that large herds of cattle bestowed upon a chief, cattle had an important cohesive social role, through bridewealth. Cattle formed the dowry that enabled a man to take a wife. From this it followed that a man with many cattle could marry numerous wives, and many chiefs did. Furthermore, within Tswana ruling families, men often married cousins, thus keeping the bridewealth within the wider family. Commoners, on the other hand, who often had no cattle, became dependent on the ruling lineage from whom they borrowed cattle for their bridewealth.

Southern Africa in the eighteenth century



Cattle, however, were not the only source of a chief's power. There was a spiritual element too. It was believed that the chief had links with the spirits of the lineage's ancestors who looked after the temporal wellbeing of the *morafe* (the state or kingdom). The chief's most important religious duty was to conduct the annual rain-making ceremony. This was held between September and November and was intended to herald the early spring rains that signalled the ploughing and planting season after the long, dry months of winter. A chief's success and power were often judged by his ability to 'make rain'. Prolonged periods of drought, therefore, promoted the cause of rival claimants to the chieftaincy, while the polygamous practices of the ruling families provided many potential challengers.

Much of the oral tradition for this period is concerned with the formation of new Tswana states. This was often associated with succession disputes. A disappointed claimant would take his dependants, relatives and other supporters and found a new chieftom out of reach of the tribute demands of his rival. Splits like this often occurred at times of natural crisis such as drought and so were probably also prompted by a genuine need or desire to find new water resources, arable land, hunting territory or grazing lands for

expanding herds of cattle. The Tswana were never expanding into empty land, but it was often lightly populated by hunter-gatherers or small-scale farmers and livestock keepers. With their wealth in cattle, the Tswana were soon able to dominate a new region, often absorbing pre-existing residents into their own ranks.

Figure 15.4 A typical Tswana house of southern Africa. The perimeter fencing, made of reeds, would usually enclose several round houses of the style shown here. To the left of the house are two storage bins for grain, while behind the house, to the right, hangs a goatskin bag for holding soured milk, or yoghurt, a major part of the Tswana diet. Painting by English artist Samuel Daniell in 1804.



Source: Historical Picture Archive/Corbis/Getty Images.

The Tswana avoided potentially self-destructive dynastic disputes by allowing a rival claimant to the chieftaincy to peacefully lead away his cattle and his dependants and form a new *morafe*, perhaps somewhere with better grazing or water resources. In this way, Tswana chieftaincies expanded from their heartland. By the eighteenth century, the Hurutshe, the Kwena, the Kgatla and the Ngwaketse dominated the Tswana heartland around the headwaters of the upper tributaries of the Limpopo River. To their south, the Rolong and the Tlhaping stretched their settlements as far as the lower Vaal, while to the north the Ngwato, an offshoot from the Kwena offshoot,

settled in what is now eastern central Botswana. Finally, in the 1790s, an offshoot from the Ngwato, the Tawana, crossed the northern Kalahari and founded a new *morafe* near Lake Ngami (see [Map 15.3](#)).

To some extent, initiation ceremonies were a counterbalance to the *morafe*'s tendency to split. Initiates for the ceremonies, by which adolescents passed into adulthood, were summoned by the chief every few years, usually when his own son or daughter was of the appropriate age to lead an age-group. The initiation school, which could last for several weeks, included indoctrination in the social mores and customary duties of an adult and concluded with male circumcision, after which initiates were formed into age-regiments. The female regiments became an important source of communal agricultural labour at the disposal of the chief, while the primary function of the male regiments was to form communal hunting parties. The summoning of the regiments, drawn from similarly aged men or women from right across the wards and villages of the *morafe*, was an important unifying factor within the state.

In due course, the Tswana states reached their environmental limits. There was no longer suitable, lightly populated land into which they could expand with their cattle and their settlements. By the second half of the eighteenth century, competition for resources became evident and male age-regiments began increasingly to assume a military role. The late eighteenth century became a period of frequent conflict as the principal Tswana states clashed over cattle, grazing, water resources and hunting grounds. Competition over the latter may have been stimulated by the demands of long-distance trade. Small amounts of beads and cloth were reaching the western Tswana from the east African coast, and these were likely to have been exchanged for ivory and furs. By the turn of the century, the tentacles of traders and raiders from the Cape Colony were beginning to stretch north of the Orange River, with their demands for ivory, furs and cattle.

From at least the late eighteenth century, the core population of the Tswana states began living in large centralised towns. These numbered 10,000–15,000 people, with Kaditshwene, the Hurutshe capital, being recorded as up to 20,000 strong in 1820. They were extraordinarily large towns for low-technology, preindustrial communities, and it is thought that their formation may have been for defensive purposes, in response to increasing levels of warfare between Tswana states in this period.

Meanwhile, to the east of the central Tswana states were northern Sotho, of whom the main branch were the Pedi, an earlier offshoot from the Kgatla. While sending out their own offshoots, the main eighteenth-century Pedi stronghold was the Leolu Mountains of the northeastern Transvaal (the modern South African province of Mpumalanga). Further north, towards the middle Limpopo valley lay the chiefdoms of the Lobedu and the Venda, with their origins stemming from the Shona of Zimbabwe to their north.

The southern Sotho chiefdoms south of the Vaal River tended not to form the large centralised states so characteristic of the Tswana to their north. Their chiefdoms were smaller and more numerous, and by the late eighteenth century were scattered over much of the present-day Orange Free State and Lesotho. There were particular concentrations of chiefdoms in the valleys of the southern tributaries of the Vaal and in the fertile valley of the Caledon River, which flowed southwards into the Orange River. The oldest of the southern Sotho chiefdoms are thought to have been those of the Fokeng, who spread into this area from the central highveld in the fifteenth century. Further expansion and subdivisions from north of the Vaal in subsequent centuries brought Tlokoa, Koena and Taung chiefdoms into this southern Sotho highveld.

Finally, there was movement of people between southern highveld and southeastern lowveld across the narrow passes of the Drakensberg just north of present-day Lesotho. The Nguni-speaking Zizi had probably penetrated the eastern part of the southern highveld even before the arrival of the Fokeng. Some arrivals on the highveld, like the Ndzundza of the eastern Transvaal, retained a distinctive degree of Nguni culture and language. Other small groups of Nguni origin blended more thoroughly into Sotho-Tswana society, such as the Lete of the western Transvaal, while certain clans of present-day Lesotho are thought to have Nguni-related origins. Likewise, it is probable that certain Sotho practices and customs, in relation for instance to cattle keeping and initiation, appear to have been passed through the Drakensberg to the Nguni of the lowveld.

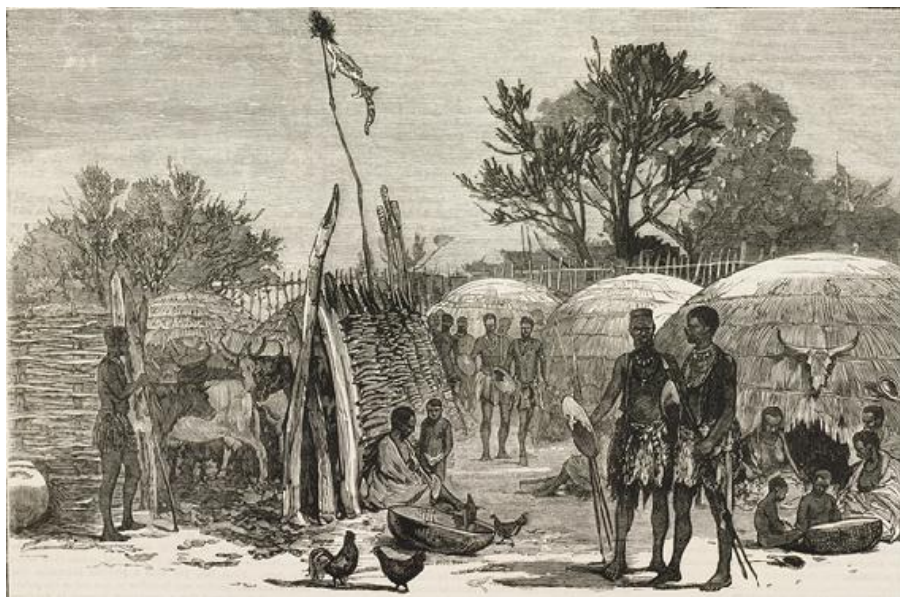
The peoples of the southeastern lowveld

Until the latter part of the eighteenth century, the chiefdoms of the Nguni were generally smaller than those of the Sotho-Tswana of the central and western highveld. This may have been partly the result of the geography of the region. The lowveld to the southeast of the Drakensberg received generally higher rainfall than the highveld to the northwest. It was also much hillier territory. The region was cut

by the deep valleys of numerous rivers flowing down from the mountains to the sea. Thus, there was a wide variety of arable and grazing resources in the region, from the drier but fertile valley bottoms to the well-watered woodlands of the hills. Small family-sized homesteads were able to live almost independently of each other, provided they were free to move their cattle between the differing grasslands of uplands and valleys according to the season. While population levels and sizes of herds remained low, this presented little problem. Related homesteads were grouped into chiefdoms and, as with the Sotho-Tswana, when there were succession disputes, unsuccessful claimants were able to move off and found new chieftaincies in hitherto little-used regions. In doing so, they tended to absorb into their ranks the Khoesan whom they found there. In fact, the relatively high rate of Nguni-Khoe absorption led to the development of distinctive Khoesan 'click' sounds in the Nguni languages.

We have already seen above how the southernmost Nguni, the Xhosa, expanded westwards, absorbing Khoesan chiefdoms until, in the late eighteenth century, they came into violent conflict with the vanguard of the trekboers, expanding eastwards from the Cape Colony. For the central and northern Nguni, the eighteenth century was also a period of significant developments in state formation, which, in the long term, were to prove even more significant for the peoples of the southern African interior in the early nineteenth century.

Figure 15.5 The interior of an Nguni homestead on the Tugela River. The livestock are kept within the inner barricade. Engraving by an unnamed artist in the *Illustrated London News*.



Source: De Agostini/Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Getty Images.

During the course of the eighteenth century, a number of northern Nguni chiefdoms in particular expanded and absorbed minor chiefdoms into their ranks. This appears to have been related to heightened competition over the resources of the region. Maize, introduced from America by the Portuguese through Delagoa Bay, had begun to be cultivated widely in the region. It yielded much heavier crops than native African sorghum, provided rainfall levels were high. And the latter half of the eighteenth century was a period of unusually high rainfall. With more food available, population levels were able to expand and bring more land into cultivation. Cattle too thrived and multiplied on the much improved pasture and more woodland was cut down to expose new grazing veld. At the same time, the development of long-distance trade with the Tsonga, and the Portuguese and English at Delagoa Bay, encouraged the growth of northern Nguni states. The desire to control the export of ivory heightened competition for the rich hunting grounds of the coastal forest belt.

Like the Sotho-Tswana of the highveld, the Nguni held initiation ceremonies and formed age-regiments, the practice possibly being adopted from the Sotho-Tswana in the first place. As chiefdoms grew in size and the competition between them for limited resources became more marked, the role of the armed regiments grew ever more significant.

By the late eighteenth century, the northern Nguni chiefdoms had amalgamated into three dominant kingdoms, the Ndwandwe of Zwide, the Ngwane of Sobhuza (under Sobhuza's son and successor Mswati,

the Ngwane were to become known as the Swazi, the founders of the present Kingdom of Swaziland) and the Mthethwa of Dingiswayo (see [Map 15.3](#)). Conflict between them had heightened by the turn of the century, the main stimulus of which is the subject of some debate. This and the consequences of that conflict will be discussed in [Chapter 20](#).

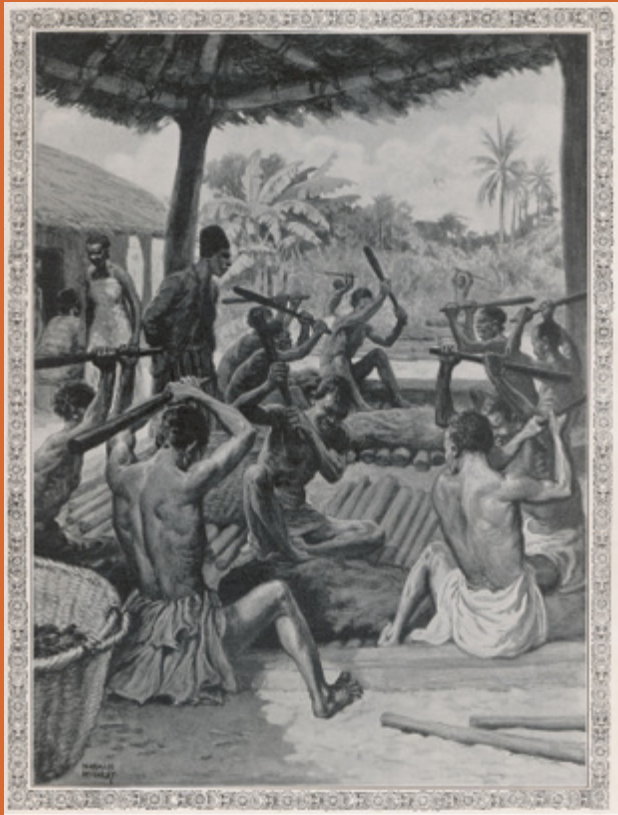


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SECTION 7



THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BEFORE THE EUROPEAN 'SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA'



The first three-quarters of the nineteenth century was a particularly important period in African history, not least because it was the last period of African independence before the European onslaught with which the century ended. It was a dynamic and tumultuous time, but one in which African leaders were still in control of their own destinies. A central theme of Chapters 16–21 is still the slave trade and its eventual abolition, because the trade itself and its abolition impacted on other important themes, namely the emergence of new states and the consolidation of old ones, and the impact of the changing demands of external international trade.

In west Africa's woodland savannah belt between the forest and the Sahel, a number of Islamic leaders built a series of powerful new states based on the promise of social and political reform. Once established, these and others provided a level of stability and subsequently formed major centres of resistance to the European invasion when it came. The historiography of the abolition of the slave trade is discussed in some depth. The impact and enforcement of abolition varied across the region, and internal slavery expanded as African rulers and merchants turned from exporting labour to the

production of primary commodities for export. The importation of mass-produced manufactured products in exchange for African primary commodities not only undermined indigenous craft manufacturing, but left Africans in an unequal trading relationship with the industrial world. Indeed, the terms of trade laid down in west Africa during this period were to prevail, little altered, through the colonial period and even into the twenty-first century.

Sierra Leone and Liberia, two new states, grew out of slavery and the slave trade, and were important avenues for the spread of Christianity, prompted by European Christian missionaries who started penetrating tropical Africa at this time. They brought with them an assumption of the material and cultural superiority of western 'civilisation'. As such, their work was a form of cultural imperialism that, perhaps only in retrospect, was, in effect, a 'softening up' of African perceptions ahead of the formal imperialism that was to come. Meanwhile, culturally assimilated Africans did their best to take ownership of European religious and cultural ideals and forge a new African identity. This was particularly notable in the coastal territories of west Africa, where there had been a long history of contact with Europeans, albeit of a largely negative nature. Here, way ahead of the twentieth century, are to be found some of the roots of a new intellectual vision of African nationalism that was at ease with the broader concept of Pan-Africanism. But these attempts to find an African way to meet the growing power of industrial globalisation on more equal terms were soon to be swept aside by imperial ambition.

In western-central Africa, transatlantic slaving actually increased in volume until its mid-century ban. It was replaced in the second half of the nineteenth century by new bands of African raiders who hunted for ivory and gathered beeswax and rubber for export. No chance here for the levels of stability offered by the new states emerging in west Africa.

In eastern-central Africa in this period, the impact of a new upsurge in demand for slave exports and labour on the east African coast was just beginning to be felt. New states arose, but, with some notable exceptions, their dominant theme was hunting for ivory and buying or capturing slaves for export. Organised bands of raiders and traders became dominant and new raiding/trading states emerged as the east African slave trade rose in scale through the middle decades of the century.

Meanwhile, in southern Africa, much has been made of the rise of the Zulu Kingdom and other states in the first third of the nineteenth century. Recent historiography, however, has located this in the context of a more widespread consolidation of states from the end of

the eighteenth century. This trend arose from a variety of motives, although it was often accompanied by a rise in interstate warfare. The ultimate aim of most of this relocation and state consolidation, whether offensive or defensive, was security and stability. Ultimately, the biggest threat to African security north of the Cape Colony came from an invasion of white settlers in the 1830s and 40s. This presaged what was to come, although by the dawn of the mineral revolution of 1870, a certain degree of equilibrium had been established between independent African kingdoms and white colonial states.

In northern Africa, the Ottomans managed to expel a French invasion of Egypt at the dawn of the century. A new ruling class turned this to advantage by modernising the Egyptian state, ironically applying principles only superficially differing from those used by the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt. Meanwhile, the French occupation of Algeria took 40 years (1830–70) to complete in the face of determined Muslim resistance. Subsequently, the colonial rivalry between Britain and France, which was ultimately to lead to the so-called ‘Scramble for Africa’, can be argued to have begun in north Africa, sparked by the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. This event, while directed at extinguishing a brief flowering of modern Egyptian nationalism and safeguarding British investments in Egypt, was primarily about protecting the Suez Canal route to India.

In the Horn of Africa, a reunited Ethiopia received a sharp military reproof when it attempted to treat a European nation on equal diplomatic terms. Nevertheless, Ethiopia emerged more powerful from that setback and went on to become the only African nation to survive European colonial occupation at the end of the century.

CHAPTER 16

West Africa in the nineteenth century

Islamic jihads in the western Sudan

Origins: the Fulbe (or Fulani)

In the early nineteenth century, the political map of western Africa was dramatically changed as a succession of wars swept the savannah lands of the region. The political leaders of these military uprisings justified their wars in the name of Islam, claiming that they were waging jihad. This implied that they were waging war against ‘the unbeliever’, and yet, in many cases, these wars pitched Muslim against Muslim. In reality, these were wars over the political control of an existing state or the creation of a new state out of the remnants of several former states. The Muslim leaders who formed the spearhead of this movement were drawn largely from people of Fulbe origin.

As we saw in [Chapter 7](#), the Fulbe were a distinctive, mainly pastoralist people who had spread across much of the west African savannah by the seventeenth century. They retained their separate identity and usually took no part in the political life of the states or chiefdoms among whom they had settled. This may have suited them at first, but in due course they found increasing hostility and pressure from the local settled agricultural populations around them.

Their sense of isolation from the people among whom they were settled may help explain why many Fulbe at this time turned to Islam, which they knew of through contact with the Muslim traders of the towns and Tuareg pastoralists of the Sahel. Islam gave the Fulbe an added sense of unity and purpose, while Islamic Shari’a law provided an alternative model of government with which to compare and confront their rulers. By the early eighteenth century, a number of Fulbe Muslim clans were rivalling the Tuareg as the leading Islamic scholars of west Africa. Conversion of ‘the unbeliever’ was an essential duty of Islam and those Fulbe Muslim teachers who preached jihad against the infidel may have been drawing inspiration from earlier religious reforming movements, such as the eleventh-century Almoravids (see [Chapter 7](#)). Despite the fact that many of these jihads were not, in fact, fought against ‘unbelievers’, the waging of one war in the name of Islam frequently served to inspire the launching of another jihad elsewhere.

The jihads of Futa Jalon and Futa Toro

The west African jihadist movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began in the highlands of Futa Jalon, in what is now the modern state of Guinea. Fulbe pastoralists had settled in these

highlands from the early sixteenth century. The local farming population was organised in a series of small village chiefdoms. As their herds increased in size, the Fulbe felt increasing pressure from the restrictions and taxation of the farmers, but in Islam they found their salvation. In 1725, the Fulbe rose in rebellion and, with the support of Muslim traders, they waged holy war against the settled farmers who, for the most part, continued to practise their indigenous religion. It was 1750 before their conquest was complete. By then, they had brought the region under Islamic law and created a Fulbe-dominated state. As we saw in [Chapter 11](#), their wars of conquest produced a surplus of captives who were sold into slavery to European traders at the coast.

The Futa Jalon jihad inspired a similar movement to the south of the lower Senegal River. Here, between 1769 and 1776, the Muslim Tukolor (Tukulor) and Fulbe peoples waged successful war against their neighbours until they had created their new Muslim state of Futa Toro and brought it under the rule of Shari'a law.

Usman dan Fodio and the founding of the Sokoto Caliphate

The eighteenth-century wars that saw the foundation of Futa Jalon and Futa Toro provided inspiration for later Muslim teachers elsewhere in western Africa. In the early nineteenth century, a series of wars were waged in the name of jihad within the Hausa states of the northern regions of modern Nigeria. From these wars, the Sokoto Caliphate or empire emerged, the largest single west African state of the early nineteenth century. The leader and inspirer of the Sokoto revolution was Usman dan Fodio, son of a Fulbe Muslim teacher in the northern Hausa state of Gobir. (In this eastern region of west Africa, the Fulbe were known by the Hausa name Fulani.)

Although Usman never went on pilgrimage to Mecca, he was a widely educated Muslim scholar and undoubtedly knew about the west African jihads of Futa Jalon and Futa Toro. He completed his schooling at Agades, on the edge of the Sahara, under the influence of the revolutionary Tuareg holy man Jibril ibn 'Umar, who preached the value and importance of jihad. Usman began his preaching as a young man in the 1770s in the Hausa state of Gobir. His two main concerns were the conversion of those Fulani pastoralists who still retained indigenous religious beliefs, and the religious and social reform of the Muslim Hausa rulers, whom he judged to be failing to follow the strict principles of Shari'a. At this stage, Usman hoped to achieve his ends

by the peaceful preaching of reform. However, he grew increasingly critical of the Hausa government, which he accused of corruption and injustice (see [Chapter 12](#)). In this, he had the support of Fulani pastoralists, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who resented the Hausa's taxation of their cattle.

Usman's reputation as a holy man and preacher quickly spread through the Muslim communities of the Hausa states. It was even rumoured among some of his more enthusiastic supporters that he was the Mahdi, the prophesied Muslim leader who would prepare the faithful for the end of the world and the second coming of Muhammad. By the 1790s, Usman had gathered a considerable following at Degel near the border of Gobir and Kebbi. His growing power and influence were resented by the rulers of Gobir, who tried to restrict his movements and prevent him making further conversions.

A crisis was reached in the early 1800s when Yunfa, the king of Gobir, tried to assassinate Usman. In imitation of the Prophet Muhammad's *Hijrah* from Mecca in 622, Usman and his followers withdrew from Gobir. In 1804, they successfully defended themselves from an attack by Yunfa's cavalry. This marked the beginning of Usman's jihad.

The revolution quickly spread through the Muslim and Fulani communities of Hausaland. It was not a single religious war, but a series of simultaneous uprisings against the rule of the Hausa aristocracy. The capital of Gobir was finally captured in 1808, by which time the Hausa states of Kebbi, Zamfara, Zaria, Katsina and Kano had fallen to the jihadists. The Hausa rulers fell because they failed to gain the support of the oppressed Hausa peasantry, and because they did not act in unison, even when facing a common threat – centuries of interstate rivalry had proved their final undoing.

Usman retired into religious life, and the active leadership of the new Islamic empire was taken over by his brother Abdullahi and his son Muhammed Bello. In 1809, a new capital was built at Sokoto in Kebbi and the so-called jihad was pursued with vigour beyond the Hausa states, particularly in the south and east. Western Borno was captured and Adamawa was added to the empire. By the time of Usman's death in 1817, the Sokoto Caliphate stretched from Songhay in the west to the headwaters of the Benue River in the east ([Map 16.1](#)). There followed further extension in the south as Nupe and the Yoruba state of Ilorin were brought within the empire. It has been estimated that by the time of Muhammed Bello's death in 1837, the Caliphate of Sokoto had a population of some 10 million people, larger than that of any west African state before it.



The Sokoto Caliphate

The Sokoto Caliphate had been achieved through a series of local uprisings, acting independently but with the support and approval of the caliph. The movement had been led by rural Fulani and Muslim Hausa townsmen. A number of Fulani pastoralists, of doubtful Muslim conviction, used it as an opportunity to loot the towns. This turned many of the Hausa against the movement. But once the conquests were complete and the Hausa aristocracy were removed, the empire settled down and the economic life of the region resumed.

The empire consisted of a number of separate Muslim emirates that acted independently in local matters, but took their religious authority from the caliph at Sokoto. And since it was an Islamic religious state, political power was equated with religious authority. The emirs visited Sokoto once a year to show their loyalty to the caliph and submit an annual tribute. Beyond that, the economy of Hausaland was soon re-established along much the same lines as before. The old Hausa aristocracy had been replaced by a new Fulani one, but they became increasingly 'Hausaised', adopting Hausa language and culture. They were careful not to become as corrupt as their predecessors, and greater respect for Islamic law ensured greater justice for the general Hausa population.

Islam and literacy spread more widely through the population, and unity under Islam brought an end to the destructive wars of interstate rivalry. Trade flourished and Kano in particular became a major market centre. Those who benefited least were the Hausa peasantry, who had merely exchanged one master for another. Slavery too

remained an essential part of the economic life of the Sokoto Caliphate, both in domestic service and working on the land to feed the towns. There remained, even within the empire, pockets of non-Muslim resistance, and jihads against these provided a constant source of captives for pressing into slavery.

Borno in the nineteenth century

When Fulani pastoralists rose in rebellion against the Muslim Sultanate of Borno, they quickly seized control of the western regions and even drove the Mai from his capital of Birni Ngazargamu. But Borno was not another Hausaland. It had a long and deep Islamic tradition: it was not ripe for political revolution in the name of Islam, and the Kanuri of Borno were not prepared to accept Fulani domination. Militarily, Borno was saved by a remarkable religious leader from Kanem known as Muhammad al-Kanemi. (In fact, al-Kanemi was reputed to have been born in Fezzan, in the Libyan desert, once the northernmost province of Borno-Kanem.) Al-Kanemi organised resistance and protested to the caliph of Sokoto that Borno was already an Islamic state, so there was no justification to wage jihad against it. At the same time, he backed up his protests by introducing religious and legal reforms in Borno.

Al-Kanemi ruled the Sultanate of Borno in all but name, while the *Mai* remained little more than a figurehead. On his death in 1837, al-Kanemi was succeeded as *shehu* (religious leader) by his son Umar. In 1846, Mai Ibrahim tried to regain control by organising an invasion of Borno from the central Sudanic Sultanate of Wadai, but his attempt failed and he was captured and executed. Ibrahim was last in the Saifawa line and his death ended one of Africa's longest ruling dynasties.

Shehu Umar now became undisputed ruler, although Borno never regained its former position of wealth and prominence. In the west, it had lost its hold of eastern Hausaland to the emirs of Sokoto. In the north and east, it lost much of its access to the trans-Saharan trade to the Sultanate of Wadai, which opened up direct links to Benghazi in north Africa. Within Borno itself, this further emphasised the division between wealthy rulers and oppressed peasantry. With the loss of trading income, the *shehus* of Borno demanded ever higher taxes from the already hard-pressed peasantry.

In the 1890s, as Borno was about to fall to European imperialism, it was conquered from the east by a military genius from the Nilotic savannah named Rabih ibn Fadl Allah. It was he who went on to lead

seven years of resistance to French imperial conquest.

The Tukolor Empire of al-Hajj Umar

Meanwhile, to the west of Sokoto, Usman dan Fodio's example had inspired further Muslim revolutions. In 1818, both Muslim and non-Muslim Fulbe in the upper Niger Delta region rebelled against their local rulers and created the Fulbe-dominated state of Masina. This new state was later to become part of the Tukolor Empire, which rose from further to the west. The revolution that created the Tukolor Empire was led by a Muslim preacher from Futa Toro named al-Hajj Umar.

Umar was strongly influenced by the Usman revolution that had created the Sokoto Caliphate. In 1826, Umar set off on a lengthy pilgrimage to Mecca. On his return, he passed through al-Kanemi's Borno and then spent several years at Muhammed Bello's court in Sokoto, during which time he married at least one of the caliph's daughters.

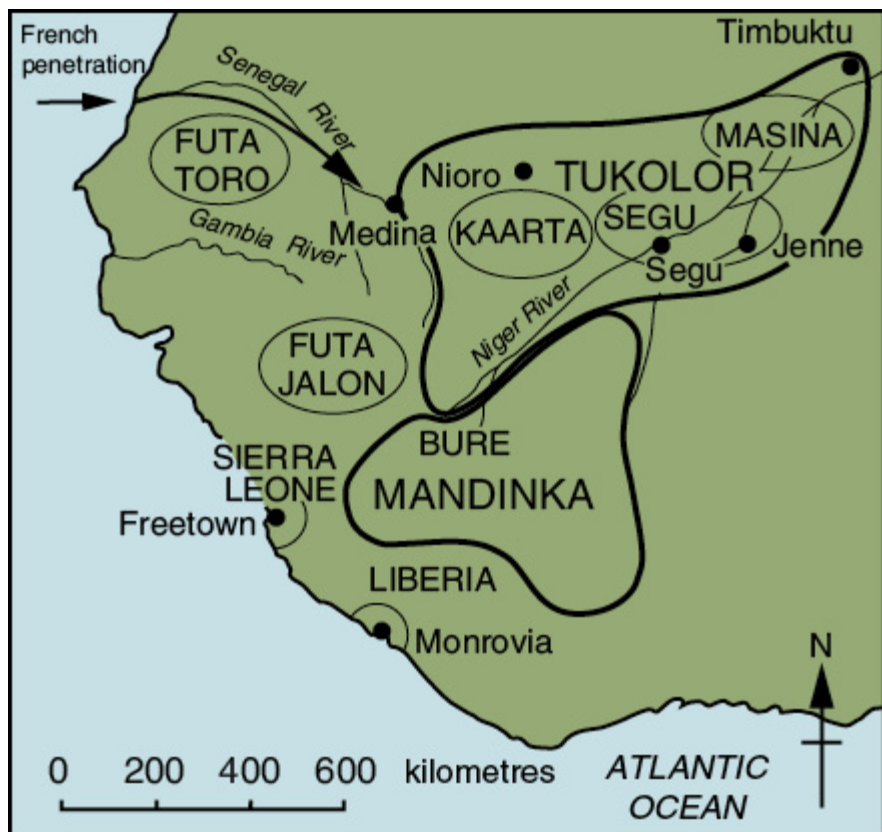
During the 1840s, Umar built up a large following on the borders of Futa Jalon. From there he traded non-Muslim captives in exchange for firearms with which to modernise his army. It was clear by this time that Umar was determined to create an Islamic state by force of arms. Unable to capture his home region of Futa Toro because of the French presence at Medina on the Senegal River, Umar pursued his jihad towards the northeast. By 1854, he had taken the Bamana Kingdom of Kaarta and in the early 1860s he extended his conquests through the upper Niger states of Segu and Masina. But Umar's emphasis on conquest meant that he failed to consolidate his gains and establish a stable administration that could survive his death, while his policy of forced conversion to Islam provoked spirited resistance, especially among the Bamana of upper Senegal. Following Umar's death in 1864, the Tukolor Empire was seriously weakened by internal revolts and a lack of unity among his sons and closest followers. The French were able to exploit this situation to their advantage in the 1880s and 90s.

Figure 16.1 The Segu palace of Ahmadu, ruler of the Tukolor Empire after the death of al-Hajj Umar in 1864.



Source: Alan King engraving/Alamy Stock Photo.

The Tukolor and Mandinka Empires



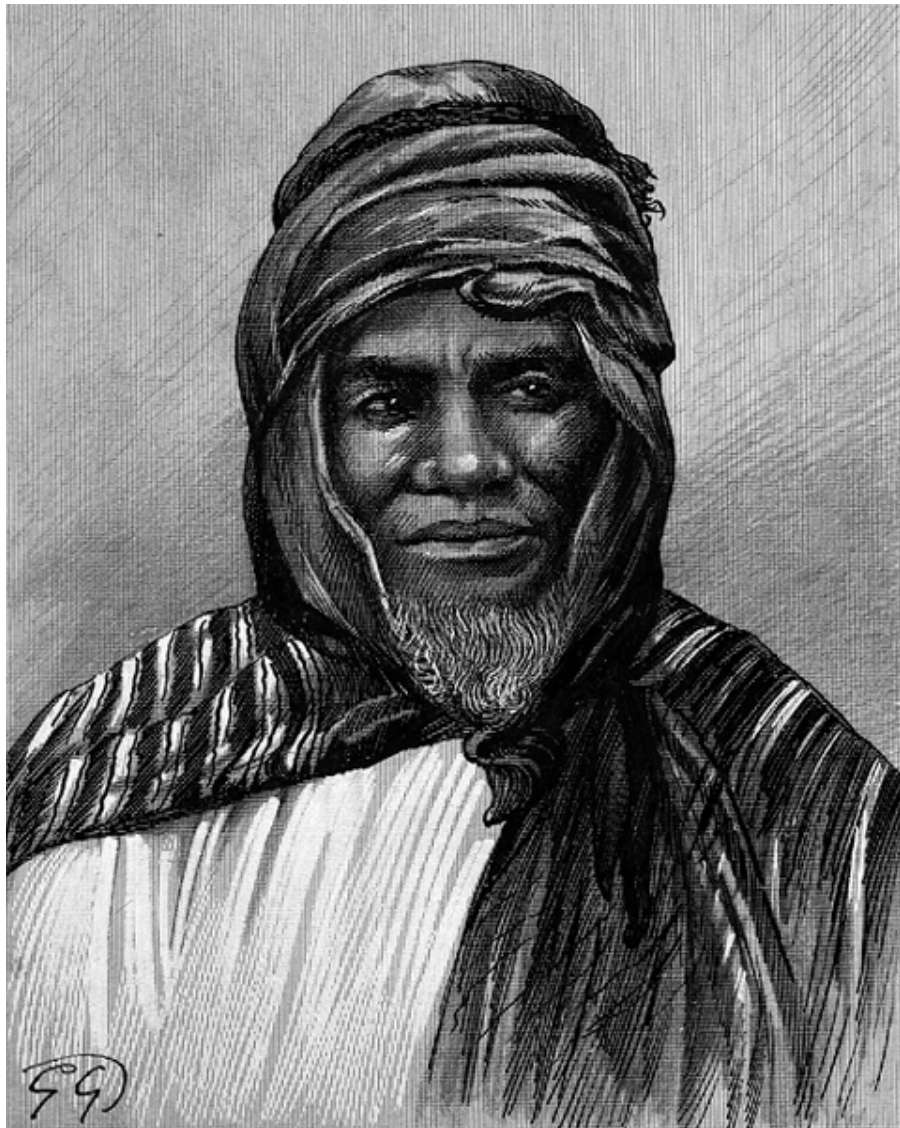
Samori Touré and the rise of the Mandinka Empire

Meanwhile, the Mandinka Empire of Samori Touré arose to the south of Tukolor. Samori Touré ([Figure 16.2](#)) came from a non-Muslim Dyula trading family who lived in the region of the upper Niger basin to the east of Futa Jalon. As a young man in the 1860s, he built up and trained a force of well-armed soldiers to protect the trading interests of his family. There was one of a number of Mandinka-speaking states based around Dyula trading towns. (The Mandinka, like the Malinke, were a branch of the Mande-speaking peoples who had formed the heartland of the ancient Empire of Mali; see [Chapter 7](#).) Samori's family were engaged in the trade in gold dust from Buré and cattle from Futa Jalon. Under his leadership, they used their extensive Dyula connections to import firearms from the coast and so strengthen and modernise their army.

Between 1865 and 1875, Samori conquered the surrounding Dyula states and built up a powerful Mandinka kingdom. The unity he established in the region eased trade and brought greater prosperity to

the merchants. At some time in his youth, Samori became a Muslim, and while not proclaiming his wars a jihad in the manner of some of his contemporaries, he used Islam to unite and strengthen his kingdom. He promoted Muslim education and the building of mosques and used Islamic law as the basis for his rule. During the late 1870s, Samori extended his conquests to include the Buré goldfields in the north and down the upper Niger valley towards modern Bamako. By the early 1880s, he had turned his trading kingdom into a huge empire, the third largest in western Africa (after Sokoto and Tukolor). In the view of many of Samori's Mandinka subjects, he was reuniting the Mande-speaking peoples and resurrecting the ancient Empire of Mali.

Figure 16.2 Portrait of Samori Touré, ruler of the Mandinka Empire, 1865–98.



Source: Roger Viollet/Contributor/Getty Images.

Besides the spread of Islam, the strength of Samori's army was a major unifying factor in the creation of the Mandinka Empire. He incorporated male captives into the army rather than selling them as slaves. This increased local loyalties to Samori and the state. He imported the latest breech-loading rifles from the Sierra Leone port of Freetown and he used local ironsmiths to repair and manufacture muzzle-loading guns.

Samori's Mandinka Empire, however, was short-lived. Constantly engaged in defending his conquests from outside invasion, Samori had little opportunity to devote his considerable talents to further

development within the state. As it was, the extent of peace and security within the empire impressed those visitors who saw it. But, in 1881, the Mandinka had their first clash with the French, who were extending their colonial control westwards from the upper Senegal River (see [Chapter 22](#)). Although the final struggle was postponed by a treaty with the French, the Mandinka army was one of the major forces of resistance to French conquest in west Africa in the 1890s.

While the Islamic reformist movement of the early nineteenth century was changing the political pattern of the western Sudan, a reformist movement of a different kind was taking place within the European nations responsible for the promotion and conduct of the transatlantic slave trade.



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CHAPTER 17

The ending of the Atlantic slave trade

During the course of the eighteenth century, Britain overtook all other European nations as the single largest exporter of Africans from Africa. By the end of the century, more than half the captives transported from west Africa were carried across the Atlantic in British ships. It was only after a vigorous campaign by anti-slave trade campaigners that Britain finally banned British ships from engaging in the trade. In fact, there had been a wide international movement against the trade and slavery itself since at least the 1780s. Northern US states had been banning the institution of slavery from that time. In France, the revolutionary government imposed a partial ban – the emancipation of second-generation slaves in the colonies – in 1791, which sparked the Haitian Revolution, although Napoleon reversed the ban in 1802. Denmark banned its citizens from engaging in the trade from 1803. Although Britain had, hitherto, been far from taking the lead in the anti-slavery movement, in the 1800s, Britain was emerging as the leading world power and its ban of 1807 was an important step in the abolition of the institution of slavery itself. The newly independent United States of America officially banned its subjects from engaging in the trade in 1808, although the institution of slavery remained in the USA and became a pretext for civil war in that country in the 1860s. Holland and France banned the trade in 1814 and 1817 respectively.

A detailed consideration of the abolition movement is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, it is important to understand something of the motivations that lay behind the abolitionists' cause, and the debate among historians that this has given rise to. In particular, abolition gave birth to important changes in the relationships between Europeans and west Africans in the course of the nineteenth century. These were to culminate in the notorious

‘Scramble for Africa’ of the 1880s and 90s.

North American Quakers had been arguing against the iniquities of slavery and the slave trade since its inception in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, when the transatlantic trade was at its height, the American War of Independence against Britain (1776–83) and the French Revolution (1789–99) – in the name of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – provided important stimulation for the abolitionist cause. There was a growing belief among European and American intellectuals in the universal right of human beings to freedom and equality. But although a small body of high-minded Europeans and Americans argued long and hard against the institution of slavery, it was by no means an entirely humanitarian, or even a solely European initiative, which finally led to abolition. The African victims of slavery and the slave trade had struggled against their loss of liberty from the start and we shall consider their role in a moment. There is much debate among historians as to whether the reason for abolition was primarily economic or humanitarian. There is the notion that, by the early nineteenth century, slavery and the slave trade were, in many respects, becoming uneconomic. This ‘economic argument’ was first put, most forcefully, by the Trinidadian historian and economist (and future prime minister) Eric Williams in 1944.¹

The economic argument for abolition

Williams challenged the complacency of British historians who, for too long, had buried their nation’s leading participatory role in the slave trade beneath the moral superiority of the Abolition Act 1807. He argued that a rapid expansion in Caribbean sugar plantations in the late eighteenth century had led to overproduction and a fall in the selling price of sugar. The French, in particular, with huge new plantations and modern machinery on their Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue, were flooding the market with cheaper sugar, which undercut their less efficient British rivals. At the same time, west African rulers and merchants were charging higher prices for the sale of their captives. This reduced European profit levels still further. Plantation owners were no longer able to pay their debts to European bankers. The latter, who had previously invested heavily in sugar and the slave trade, now found it more profitable to invest in new manufacturing industries at home. This was particularly the case in Britain, which was by then leading the world in the rising new Industrial Revolution.

Once-powerful plantation owners, argued Williams and his

supporters, lost their influence with the British government in favour of the new industrialists. British manufacturers found that cheap wage labour in European factories was more efficient and less expensive than plantation slavery. Furthermore, these 'free' paid workers had to spend (effectively, to repay) part of their wages on clothing, pottery and metal goods manufactured by the same industrialists. This provided the capitalist factory owners with their own home markets. In due course, new machinery produced ever more, and cheaper, goods, while the development of steam power made it easier and quicker to export these goods over long distances. The manufacturers and their bankers were soon seeking new markets abroad and looked again at Africa from a different angle. They saw that if Africans were left to work in Africa, instead of being removed by the slave trade, they would benefit European producers twice; they could provide Europe with important raw materials, while also providing a new, untapped market for buying the goods produced in Europe's new factories. From the early nineteenth century, therefore, Europeans and their governments began to regard Africa as a source of raw materials and a market for manufactured goods rather than simply as a source of slave labour.

The humanitarian cause

Williams' challenge to the humanitarian motive did not go unanswered. Critics of his thesis have questioned his economic data, pinpointing statistical evidence in support of the continued profitability of the Caribbean sugar industry in the early 1800s. Indeed, the London bankers were opposed to abolition, while the strong resistance in the British Parliament to William Wilberforce's abolitionist campaign could be seen as further evidence of the trade's continued economic value to the British 'establishment'. Indeed, one historian, arguing the primacy of the humanitarian campaign, referred to abolition as an act of 'econocide'.²

The debate among historians as to which was the primary force on the road to abolition: economic or humanitarian, continues, although with the weight currently tending towards the humanitarian. Contemporaries in Europe, especially in Britain, did their best to stress the humanitarian, linking it with the spread of European Christian missions in Africa in the nineteenth century. In this way, they disguised their role as the leading slave traders of the preceding century.



For more coverage of this debate, see 'The Abolition Debate' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

African resistance and the abolition of slavery

An often underestimated factor in the debate about the abolition of slavery and the slave trade at this time was the struggle of Africans themselves to obtain their own freedom. This point is often given little prominence in the history of Africa and the slave trade. In opposing their enslavement and the slave trade, Africans used both the pen and the sword.

In England, the small band of eighteenth-century abolitionists, led by Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, were joined and stimulated in their struggle by the campaigns and publications of Olaudah Equiano, also known during his lifetime as Gustavus Vassa ([Figure 17.1](#); see also [Chapter 11](#)) and Ottobah Cugoano, also known as James Stewart. Both men were ex-slaves from west Africa who had gained their freedom in England and became active in the anti-slavery movement. Broadly educated and anglicised in culture, both produced books in the late 1780s publicising the evils of the slave trade and strongly condemning the system of slavery. Equiano's autobiography became a bestseller in its day as he toured England making speeches and selling copies of his book. Cugoano proposed in 1787 that a British naval squadron should patrol west African waters to suppress the trade, although it was to be another 30 years before this idea was put into practice. Equiano and Cugoano had their counterparts in France and America. The eloquence of these Africans, speaking and writing from their own personal experience, played a significant part in the movement for abolition.

Figure 17.1 Portrait of the anti-slavery campaigner Olaudah Equiano by Daniel Orme, 1789. Plate LVIII from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 2nd edn.



Source: Universal History Archive/Getty Images.

From the very beginning of the slave trade, captive Africans had, to the best of their ability, resisted their enslavement. Their attempts were often desperate and almost suicidal. On board ship for the transatlantic passage, revolts were not uncommon and sailors were heavily armed and constantly on their guard. Once in the Americas and Caribbean islands, enslaved Africans seized almost any opportunity to escape from their bondage. An example of successful early revolt and resistance occurred in Brazil in the seventeenth

century. Here, runaway slaves set up an independent black republic known as 'Palmares'. It lasted for about 100 years before it was eventually overcome by the Portuguese. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, frequent slave revolts made the institution of slavery increasingly unsafe and expensive to maintain. In Jamaica, for instance, escapers known as 'Maroons' gathered in the central highlands where they established their own self-governing farming community. They survived frequent government attempts to oust them and their presence was a constant encouragement for those still enslaved to join them.

The most dramatic of all slave revolts occurred in the French island colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti). This was France's major sugar-producing island. Plantation production had increased so rapidly in the late eighteenth century that, by the early 1790s, Saint-Domingue contained some 400,000 slaves. Under the leadership of one of their number, known by the French name of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slaves of Saint-Domingue rose against and killed their white French masters in 1791. They beat off invasions by the French and British navies and established the independent 'Republic of Haiti' in 1803. The Haitian Revolution had a major impact on the willingness of European governments to continue to support the slave trade, although, ironically, the temporary rise in the market price for sugar brought about by the cessation of plantation production during the Haitian Revolution played into the hands of those opposing its abolition. Meanwhile, in the plantation colonies, especially in the Caribbean islands, the impact of the Haitian Revolution cannot be overestimated. It was an inspiration for other enslaved Africans to revolt, and it was a powerful warning to the slave owners and their governments as to what might happen if they continued to maintain their violent and inhumane system.

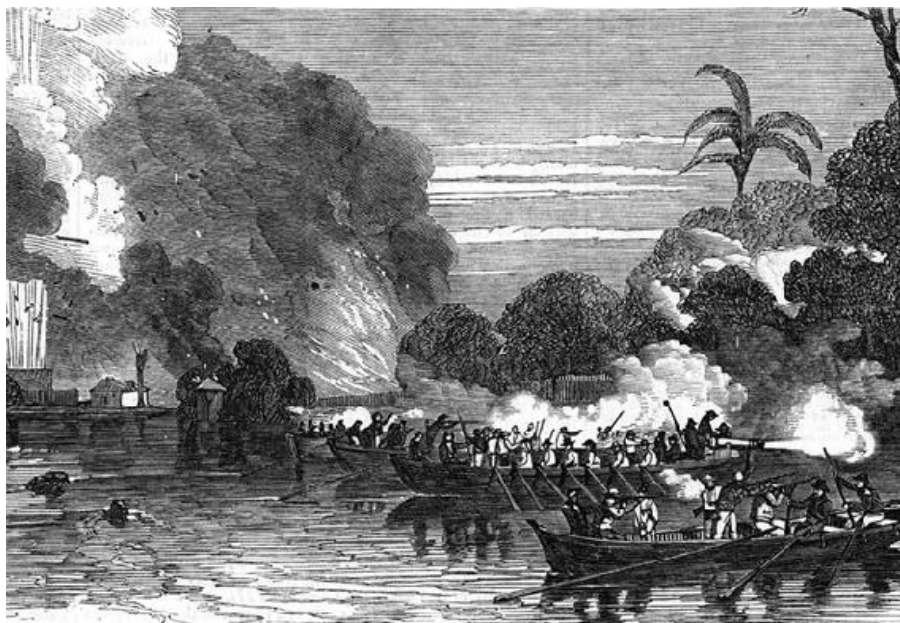
Once the British government had decided on abolition, it was determined to force its decision upon other European nations. Only if the slave trade was altogether stopped or drastically reduced could British manufacturers and merchants hope to make significant future profits out of other trade with Africa. So, Britain, which by then had the strongest navy in the world, set up an anti-slavery 'West Africa Squadron' in 1808 to patrol west African waters and use force to stop the trade. Despite these efforts, large numbers of ships escaped the British patrols. The transatlantic slave trade continued as long as plantation slavery itself continued. Indeed, for a short period in the early nineteenth century, imports of slaves into Cuba and Brazil actually increased. Slavery itself was not finally abolished until 1834 in British colonies, 1848 in French ones, 1860 in Cuba, 1865 in the

southern United States and 1888 in Brazil. It has been variously estimated that between 1.3 million and 3.5 million Africans were transported into slavery across the Atlantic during the nineteenth century.

West African commerce in the nineteenth century

For two or three centuries, European demand for slaves had dominated trade along the west African coast. It had disrupted and distorted developments in the interior. The use of slave labour became more widespread, and local agricultural production was often disrupted by the greater level of violence and warfare. There were deeper class divisions in society between rich traders and rulers on the one hand, and the poor peasantry and the enslaved on the other. Nevertheless, beneath the surface there were important positive developments. African farmers experimented with, and developed, the growing of new crops from the Americas, especially maize and cassava. These crops had been brought to Africa as a by-product of the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, trade in the age-old commodities of west Africa continued to develop between African communities themselves, as well as to Europeans at the coast or across the Sahara to north Africa. Thus, as Europeans gradually outlawed the slave trade, they found west Africa to be a fertile field for what they referred to as 'legitimate commerce'. The term was used to mean anything other than human trafficking, but it was a useful cover for the true nature of trading relations in west Africa in this precolonial period. As we shall see, from the African viewpoint, European attempts to muscle in on their trading networks were anything but 'legitimate'.

Figure 17.2 The British navy's West Africa Squadron attacks a slave establishment on the Solyman River, Sierra Leone, 1849. From *Illustrated London News*, 14 April 1849.



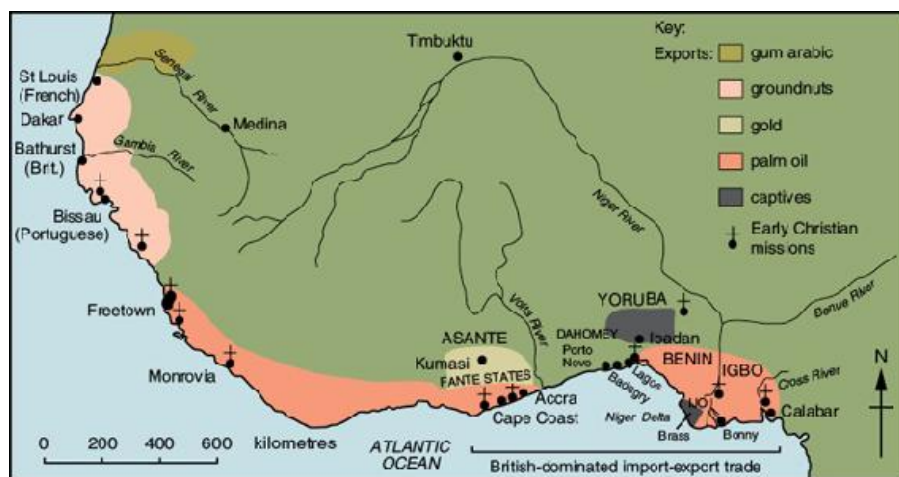
Source: *Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.*

During the first half of the nineteenth century, a range of west African commodities supplanted the export of captives. Production was organised by west African rulers and merchants, who often made use of internal slave labour for cash crop production and for transport. Rivers formed major trading arteries on which goods were transported by large dugout canoes, while overland convoys of porters carried heavy loads on their heads. Exports included gum arabic from Senegal, a natural gum made from hardened sap from acacia trees found in the savannah woodlands north of the Senegal River. In the nineteenth century, it was used for fixing coloured dyes in printed cloth in the textile factories of Europe. Other exports were groundnuts from Guinea and palm oil from most of the coastal forest zones. Now that Asante had completed its main period of expansion, its sale of captives declined and gold once more became that region's principal export commodity.

Some states, such as Dahomey, which lacked obvious economic alternatives, continued with the export of people for much of the nineteenth century. And the collapse of the old Oyo Empire, torn apart by civil wars in the 1830s and 40s, produced a major new source of war captives for export at Lagos and Badagry. At the same time, a number of Niger Delta states, such as Bonny and Brass, continued to export Igbo captives, despite vigorous attempts at suppression by British gunships and the local African exporters of palm oil. The large-scale export of captives from west Africa eventually ceased in the

1860s after the markets of Cuba and the United States had been closed.

West African exports in the nineteenth century



By the middle of the nineteenth century, palm oil had become west Africa's major overseas export. It was used in industrial Europe for the manufacture of soap, and in the early part of the century, it was a major lubricant for industrial machinery before the development of petroleum oil from the 1850s. Although oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis*) grew throughout the forest zone, the most important region for the large-scale production and export of palm oil was the Niger Delta and the Cross River valley. The Efik of Old Calabar had been among the first to develop palm oil plantations with the use of slave labour, even before the British abolition of slavery in 1807. In the Niger Delta network, the Ijo had long used their huge war canoes for transporting Igbo captives from the upriver regions for sale at the coast. They now turned their energies to transporting palm oil and became important middlemen in the trade between individual Igbo producers and the European traders at the coast.

Figure 17.3 Trading canoes on the Niger River, nineteenth-century engraving. The canoe in the middle appears to have sunk.



Source: Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.

With the vast increase in palm oil trade that developed in the 1840s and 50s, British traders began to push up the Niger in order to cut out the Ijo middlemen and deal directly with the Igbo. As European demand for oil rose, heightened competition for the trade led to a series of wars among the delta states. British traders exploited these rivalries and, with a mixture of persuasion and force, they gradually extended control over the trade of the delta during the second half of the century. But this was only part of a more general trend that was developing along the west African coast by the mid-nineteenth century.

Thus, the development of west Africa's export trade in raw materials did not provide African states with any real opportunity to develop their own economic strength and independence. First, those who benefited from the trade were a small minority of wealthy rulers and merchants. There was little improvement in the social and economic wellbeing of most of the population. Indeed, many saw their living conditions and levels of personal freedom decline as their labour was harnessed to increased production and transport for the export trade. Second, the three principal imports from Europe – cloth, alcohol and firearms – did nothing to strengthen indigenous African economies. The first item tended merely to undermine African craft industry, while the sense of wellbeing engendered by the second was purely illusory. The third item, firearms, may have enabled rulers to strengthen their grip over their subjects and neighbours. But European traders tended only to offload obsolete firearms as they modernised

their own armies. As a result, the weapons sold to Africans were never sufficiently modern and up to date to enable them to do much more than 'put up a good fight' against the machine guns and artillery of the European armies sent against them at the end of the century. Finally, those states that did develop their export trade soon found their independence threatened by direct interference from their European trading partners.

As the century progressed, European traders, backed up by their governments, made increasingly strenuous efforts to control west Africa's internal trade. They sought to reduce their own costs and maximise profits by cutting out both the African middlemen and their European competitors. It was, in part, this heightened level of European trading competition that was to drive the 'Scramble for Africa' in the 1870s and 80s. The growing European mercantile penetration of west Africa will be discussed further in Chapters 18 and 22.



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CHAPTER 18

Christian missions, new states and precolonial 'nationalism'

European Christian missionaries in precolonial Africa

Early Christian missionaries to sub-Saharan Africa

Roman Catholic Christian missionaries from Portugal had followed closely on the heels of Portuguese coastal penetration of tropical Africa. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Catholic missionaries were sent to Africa to convert a number of African rulers, who, it was hoped, would become useful allies of the Portuguese. But once African rulers realised the strong political motivation behind their presence, the missionaries' initiative was doomed to failure. In one African state after another, Portuguese missionaries were expelled or even killed. This was largely because they and their handful of converts offered a direct challenge to the established religious and political order. African rulers were interested in contact with Europeans, but they wanted new trading openings, technical assistance and firearms. They did not want new ideas that threatened to undermine the traditional religious basis of their authority.

Portuguese missionaries made little headway in Benin, and attempts to convert the oba (ruler) were abandoned in the early sixteenth century. Christianity left little lasting impression there, beyond such things as the adoption of the cross as a symbol within Benin artwork. Greater success was achieved in Kongo where a Christian convert became king in 1506. But with the growth of the slave trade, the Portuguese soon gave up even the pretence of treating the king of Kongo as a fellow Christian monarch. Foreign missionaries became increasingly alienated from the communities they were supposed to serve, as Christianity itself was absorbed into traditional Kongo culture. In Ethiopia, missionaries of the newly founded Jesuit

order followed hot on the heels of Portuguese military assistance to Galadewos in the early 1540s. But they had little to offer in the face of the well-established Ethiopian Christian Church, and in the mid-seventeenth century they were expelled for political interference. Further south, in the Mutapa state of modern Zimbabwe, Portuguese Catholic missionaries tried in the 1560s to convert the Munhumutapa and his court. They hoped in this way to establish some degree of control over the kingdom and the region's gold trade. As elsewhere, their activities provoked a political and religious reaction and in this case the missionary and some converts were killed.

Looking back from the perspective of the late eighteenth century, it was clear that European Christianity, as a vehicle for religious and cultural change, had made virtually no impact at all on the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, the Christian revival of the early nineteenth century was a very different matter. Although initially slow to take effect, its eventual impact proved to be both far-reaching and permanent.

The evangelical Christian revival

The evangelical Christian revival arose in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century western Europe and north America. It was closely related to the humanitarian movement for the abolition of the slave trade (see [Chapter 17](#)). It had arisen out of a desire to bring moral and spiritual salvation to the oppressed working classes of the new industrial cities of Europe and North America.

The evangelical movement contained a strong missionary purpose, it being the duty of every devout Christian to spread the faith to the wider 'heathen' world. In their ignorance of Africa, European Christians believed that non-Muslim Africans had no religion at all, and because African religion was not based on any written 'word of God', they dismissed any religious rituals they observed as mere superstition. Africa was therefore seen as a fruitful field for Christian missions. Here, missionaries could play their part in preaching against the evils of slavery and the slave trade. In doing so, Europeans were quick to overlook their own central role in the promotion of the slave trade.

The evangelical missionaries saw their Christianity as part and parcel of their own European cultural values – even to the extent of insisting that African converts adopt European clothing. They preached a strict puritanical moral code. They opposed dancing, drinking, nonreligious singing and any form of sexual freedom outside monogamous marriage. Applied to Africa, this meant condemnation of

much of the essential fabric of African society. In particular, they condemned what they saw as the sexual laxity of polygamy, traditional dancing to what they saw as 'heathen' songs and anything that contained an element of non-Christian ritual such as initiation and rain-making ceremonies. On the positive side, Christianity offered a sense of spiritual salvation to those who for one reason or another had lost faith in the security and comforts of traditional African beliefs. And since belief in the written word of the Bible was an essential ingredient of the new faith, the spread of Christianity also meant the spread of basic education for literacy.

During the course of the nineteenth century, a large number of European Christian societies sent their missionaries to Africa. Among the more important were the British-based Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), which was prominent in Sierra Leone; the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, which had bases and schools along the west African coastal region; and the London Missionary Society (LMS), which initially worked mainly in southern Africa. Protestant missions also came from France, Germany, Holland and the United States. French Catholic missions followed later in the century.

Sierra Leone and Liberia

The foundation and growth of Sierra Leone and Liberia were direct results of the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, and brought a Christian 'creolisation' to west Africa.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone was founded as a solution to the perceived 'problem' of the large number of unemployed black people who had settled in England, especially London, in the aftermath of the American War of Independence (1775–83). Many black people, former slaves, had fought for the British in that war and after British defeat had been forced into exile as a consequence of their 'loyalist' allegiance. The British had shipped most of them to Nova Scotia with lavish promises of land and freedom: promises that were not kept. Some of them had come to England, hoping for better treatment, but all they faced was unemployment and poverty.

Leading members of the British abolitionist movement, among them Olaudah Equiano, felt that they would face better opportunities in a free, Christian settlement on the coast of west Africa. The British

government provided some initial funding for the scheme and a ship to convey them. Threatened with prosecution for vagrancy if they did not go, 411 men, women and children boarded the ship bound for west Africa and an uncertain future. Nearly half of them died on the voyage and the survivors landed on the peninsula of modern Freetown in May 1787. They knew virtually nothing about how to survive in this tropical rural environment and by 1790, following a conflict with local inhabitants, most of them were dead.

Meanwhile, the British abolitionists had set up a trading company to support the project and, in 1792, they persuaded some 1,200 free black ‘loyalists’ from Nova Scotia to join the settlement in Sierra Leone. They were followed in 1795 by a further settlement of 500 from Nova Scotia: this time they were former Jamaican Maroons who had been exiled to Nova Scotia following their unsuccessful rebellion in Jamaica in 1775. The British trading company, renamed the Sierra Leone Company, ran the colony and appointed its governors. The Nova Scotians found none of the representative government they had been promised, but their rebellion in 1800 against the British governor’s dictatorial policies was firmly crushed. Conflict with the local Temne population turned to open warfare in 1801 and in 1807 the Temne were forced to sign over their rights to the land settled by the Sierra Leone Company.

In 1808, the British government took over the settlement from the company and declared it a ‘Crown Colony’. The previous year the British had banned the use of British ships in the transatlantic slave trade and they established a naval West Africa Squadron to patrol the west African coast and enforce the ban. In the years that followed, the British used their Sierra Leone colony as a base for settling freed blacks whom they released from captured slaving ships. The bulk of these ‘recaptives’ originated from among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of modern Nigeria (the main source of west African slave exports in the early nineteenth century). The original settlers, known collectively as ‘Creoles’, were ardent Christians and strongly anglicised in character. Christian missionaries from Britain helped spread Christianity and European-style education among the new arrivals and the growing Creole population.

Figure 18.1 The harbour, Freetown: the ex-governor is leaving, which explains all the excitement. Anonymous engraving in the *Illustrated London News*, 1854.



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

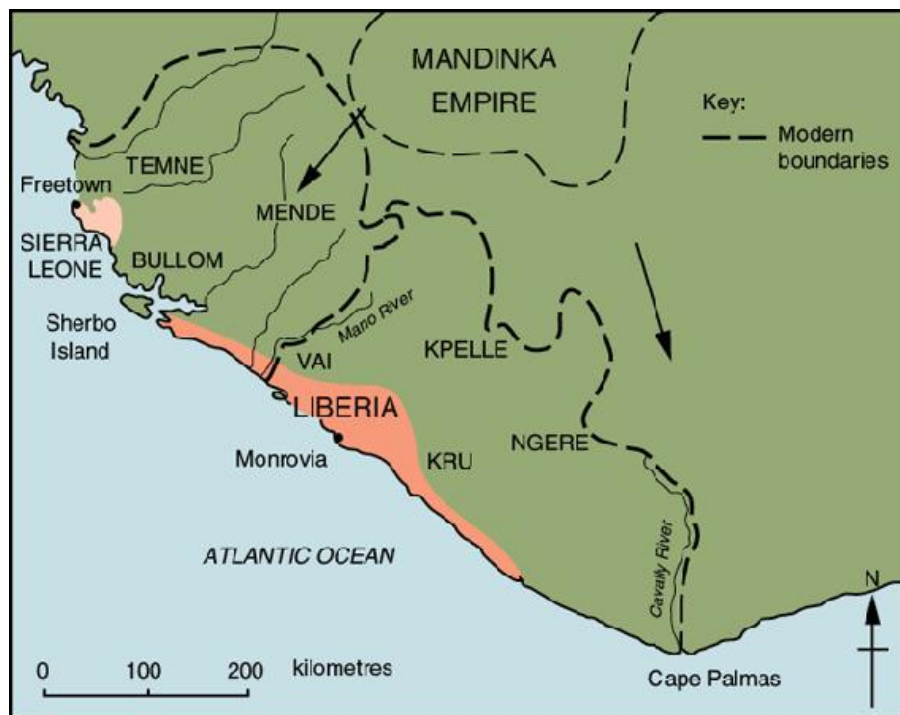
Sierra Leone had originally been founded as a settlement of farmers, but many Creoles quickly turned to trade as an easier way to make a living. Some made fortunes out of exporting commodities like timber, groundnuts and palm oil. Others became craftsmen, clerical workers, teachers and missionaries. Many travelled widely and were pioneers of Christianity and 'western' education among the peoples of west Africa. The Yoruba scholar Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a founding student of Sierra Leone's Fourah Bay College, became west Africa's first African bishop and the leader of an important Christian mission to the Niger (see [Figure 18.2](#)). He also produced the first written grammar of the Yoruba language. He and others like him made a major contribution to the intellectual development of west Africa in the nineteenth century.

Liberia

The neighbouring settlement of Liberia was founded in 1822 by freed African Americans from the United States of America. It was organised by the American Colonization Society (ACS) – a body of white Americans who believed that the increasing number of freed African Americans in the southern states made it harder to keep the other

black people around them in slavery. Representatives of the ACS forced local African chiefs in the Cape Mesurado area to sell them land at gunpoint. In the decade that followed, further settlements of freed African Americans were made along the coastline from Cape Palmas to Sherbo Island.

Sierra Leone and Liberia, c.1880



Although originally organised by American whites, educated blacks soon took over the administration of the settlement. In 1847, they declared their colony the independent republic of 'Liberia'. (The name was derived from the Latin word *liber*, meaning 'free'.) It had a constitution modelled on that of the United States and its capital, Monrovia, was named after James Monro, who had been president of the United States (1817–25) at the time the original settlement was founded. Integration with the local population was gradually extended, although the original settlers and their descendants dominated the political, economic and intellectual life of the country. Education expanded and during the course of the nineteenth century, Liberia, like Sierra Leone, produced a number of outstanding African intellectuals. Trade in palm oil, coffee, ivory and camwood (from a

west African tree, used for making red dyes in the European textile industry) became the country's major exports, although profits from these declined in the later nineteenth century. Individual Liberian merchants could not compete with powerful European rivals who established permanent bases and colonies along the west African coast. Nevertheless, despite internal political problems and corruption in the civil service, Liberia maintained a fragile independence, and survived even the European 'scramble' for African dominions at the end of the century.

African Christians and precolonial nationalism

African missions in west Africa

Sierra Leone and Liberia were the most successful early fields of mission enterprise in tropical Africa. Sierra Leone in particular had two distinct advantages. First, the large number of men, women and children that the British West Africa Squadron settled there from the 1820s had, for the most part, been torn violently from the security of traditional African cultural practices and religious beliefs. In this position, they were particularly receptive to the teachings of European missionaries. European cultural values and Christianity gave them a new sense of spiritual security and social purpose.

Second, European missionaries found themselves cut off from much of the tropical African interior by barriers of language, culture and tropical disease. Sierra Leone presented the ideal training ground for educating Africans themselves to be the missionaries who could carry the Christian message into the heart of tropical Africa. Thus, much of the early Christian mission work in the interior of tropical west Africa was, in fact, carried out by Africans themselves. Among the most important of these was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who led the successful CMS mission to the Niger Delta.

African political thought in west Africa

More significant in terms of African political thought in this period was Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Liberian settler, born in 1832 of free parents in the slave society of the Caribbean Virgin Islands. Having been refused entry to an American university in 1850, he took ship to newly independent Liberia, the African American republic on the west African coast. There, as a school and university teacher, a prolific

writer and the editor of *The Liberia Herald*, Blyden became the most influential African intellectual of his generation. His writings showed great pride in the African empires of the past, but like many of his African Christian contemporaries, Blyden believed that what Africa now needed was a new 'civilising mission'. This sounded a lot like the white paternalistic ACS, of which he was a great admirer. Unlike the ACS, however, Blyden's civilising mission – spreading the enlightenment of western knowledge and ideas – was to be brought to Africa by westernised black people like himself. In effect, he believed that the republic of Liberia, or something very like it, should be extended all along the west African coast. In these ideas, one can see the first traces of a new African 'nationalism' – distinct from indigenous African authority and independent of white control. It was also one of the earliest expositions of Pan-Africanism being applied to west Africa. Like many of his contemporaries in the 1850s and 60s, however, Blyden had a misplaced faith in British imperialism as a benevolent source of enlightenment in Africa.

Figure 18.2 Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c.1806–91). Ajayi, an enslaved Yoruba from southwestern Nigeria, was 'liberated' from a Portuguese slaving vessel off Lagos in 1821 by a ship of the British West Africa Squadron that transported him to Sierra Leone. One of the first students of Fourah Bay College, he converted to Christianity, taking the names Samuel Crowther after a CMS benefactor. He was ordained in the Anglican faith and was a founding member of the CMS mission to southern Nigeria in 1845. Ajayi Crowther was consecrated bishop of the Niger Mission in 1864. He published numerous influential books in English and translated the Bible into Yoruba. Unattributed engraving in *Missionary Heroes of Africa*.



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

Another important intellectual of this generation, and one who was to try and put some of Blyden's ideas into practice, was James 'Africanus' Horton. Born of Igbo 'recaptive' parents in Sierra Leone in 1835, James Horton showed early intellectual promise and became a student of the new Fourah Bay College in Freetown in 1853. The British army at the time, aware of the high mortality rate among European medical officers in west Africa, was keen to recruit African officers into its west African medical corps. Horton became one of their star recruits, gaining his doctorate from the University of Edinburgh in 1859. On the title page of his thesis on west African medical topography, he inserted the middle name 'Africanus', so that nobody would doubt from the rest of his name that he was African. He

rose to become a renowned surgeon major in the British army in west Africa, serving mainly in the British coastal protectorate of the Gold Coast (the coastal region of modern Ghana). He published numerous works on tropical medicine. Even while serving in the British army, however, Horton also involved himself in politics and particularly in the emerging ideas of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism, as espoused by Blyden.

The 1860s was a vibrant time among educated Africans on the Gold Coast and Horton helped in the formulation of their ideas. The British had exercised a loose 'protectorate' over the trading forts and ports of the Gold Coast since the 1840s, at times extending that protection over the local Ga and Fante peoples. During the early 1860s, the British protectorate was under threat from the powerful inland empire of Asante, which wanted to assert control over trading at the coast. The British had encouraged the coastal states of Ga and Fante, which were supposedly under their protection, to assert their independence from Asante, thus ensuring British domination of coastal trade. Tension between Britain and Asante soon led to the war of 1863–4, in which Horton served.

Following British defeat in this war, the British Parliament considered withdrawal from direct involvement in west Africa. It proposed that Britain's coastal protectorates should become self-governing under some loose form of British oversight. Although this was never implemented, it coincided with African nationalist ideas of the time and the Ga and Fante set up confederacies in anticipation of British withdrawal. The Accra and Fante confederate constitutions were influenced and largely drawn up by James Africanus Horton. They proposed a series of self-governing states, working in collaboration in a broad federal system, using a combination of the best of traditional and modern political principles. Traditional rulers would be incorporated into the government and would rule as equals alongside the educated élite. Government would be representative and the profits of trade would be used for the development of roads, schools, health, agriculture, industry and the exploitation of minerals. Most importantly, these modern states would be independent of both Asante and Britain.

It was believed by Horton and others that modernising ideas such as these could be spread throughout west Africa, thus ultimately forming a Pan-Africanist federation. The British feared the concept would lose them their influence and control and they did their best to suppress the confederacies, arresting some leaders on charges of treason. Horton's best-known political book, published in 1867, was *West African Countries and Peoples: A Vindication of the African Race*. It

was a powerful attack on European notions of racial superiority that were then becoming prominent. In 1873, war broke out again between Britain and Asante. This time the British prevailed and in 1874 they sacked the Asante capital of Kumasi. Although they withdrew from the occupation of Asante, the British followed up their military victory by declaring in 1874 that the Gold Coast protectorate would now become a full Crown Colony. This left Britain in complete control of the coastal region and killed off any hope of a modern African independent confederation.

Christian missions in southern Africa

Another hotbed of prolific early nineteenth-century mission enterprise was southern Africa. Like Sierra Leone, it contained, in the Khoesan, a large number of dislocated people. It was thus among the poor and dispossessed communities of Khoesan, freed slaves and mixed race peoples that Moravian and LMS missionaries founded their most successful early missions. The best-known African Christian of this period, however, was a Xhosa, Tiyo Soga. Born in independent Xhosa country, Soga was sent to a mission school by his mother, a Christian convert. He caught the eye of Scottish missionaries and was brought to Scotland on two occasions for further education. In 1856, he became the first African from what is today South Africa to be ordained. He returned to the Cape Colony with a Scottish wife in 1857 and worked as a missionary in the eastern Cape region. He translated much of the New Testament into the Xhosa language. In other writings, he urged his fellow Africans to take pride in their African heritage in the dominant colonial world. In tackling such issues, he was perhaps an inspiration to later African journalists in South Africa, such as J.T. Jabavu and Sol Plaatje.

In general, beyond the borders of the Cape Colony, missionaries were welcomed mostly for their technical and literary expertise – and their access to firearms. This was particularly the case at Kuruman, the LMS mission to the southern Tswana, north of the Cape Colony. Luka Jantjie was born in the 1830s, the son of a rare Christian convert from within the southern Tswana ruling family. Throughout his life he sought to reconcile the duties of a modern indigenous ruler with the aggressive demands of advancing colonialism. It was a struggle he was doomed to lose following the discovery of diamonds in his people's territory in the 1870s. Most African rulers, like Moshoeshe of the Sotho, valued European missionaries as technical advisers and literary secretaries, but resisted their religion. They viewed Christianity as a threat to the religious component of their political authority. Khama

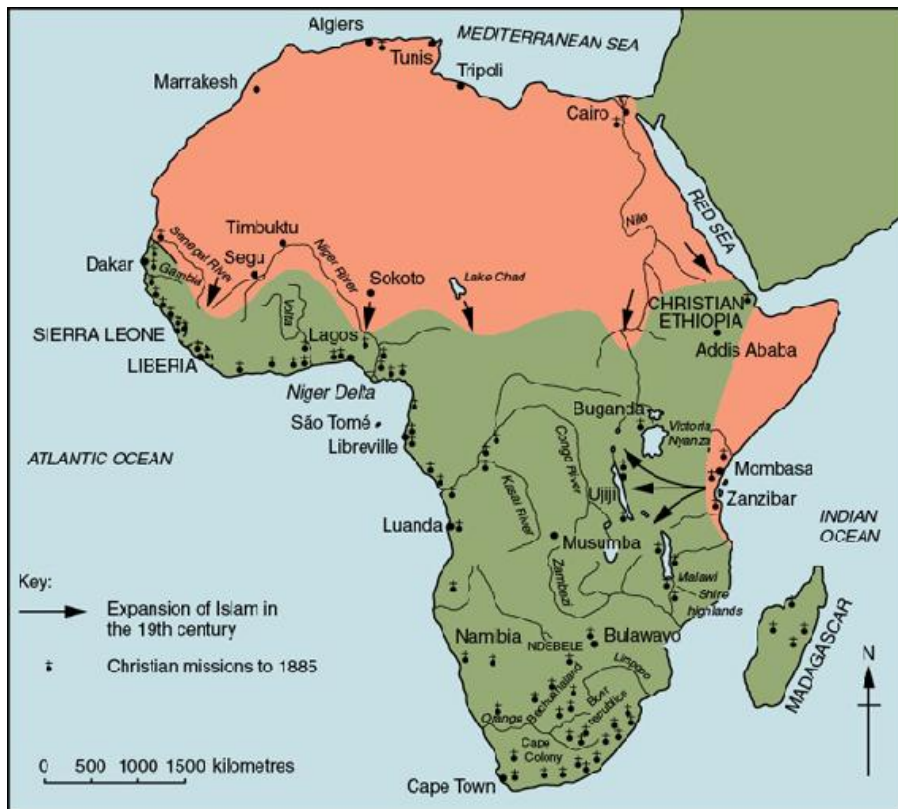
III, the most prominent kgosi of the northern Tswana, was a notable exception, who managed to use Christianity as a state religion to strengthen his authority.

Missionaries as agents of imperialism

Apart from a few special places like southern Africa, Liberia and Sierra Leone, it was clear by the third-quarter of the nineteenth century that the Christian mission in tropical Africa was making slow progress (see [Map 18.2](#)).

Mission stations were still largely confined to coastal regions, working among Africans already in cultural contact with Europeans through trading activities. Certainly, less than 1 per cent of non-Muslim Africans (outside Ethiopia) had been converted to Christianity by the early 1880s. It was largely because of this relative lack of initial success that European missionaries turned more and more to their European governments for assistance to help change African society and make it more amenable to missionary enterprise.

Christianity and Islam in Africa, up to 1885



Before the 1880s, few Christian missionaries, apart from the Portuguese in Angola and Zimbabwe, were consciously and directly active agents of European *political* imperialism. But they were very definitely agents of *cultural* imperialism. They actively sought to undermine any elements of African culture – beliefs and practices – that they deemed to be non-Christian and, in their view, ‘uncivilised’. And they superimposed on this the concept of the superiority of their own European culture. In due course, this deliberate undermining of African culture weakened African self-respect and self-confidence in the face of western culture and ultimately paved the way for the imperial control that was to come.

From the 1880s, a number of Christian missionaries played a direct and significant role in promoting and shaping the advent of European colonialism. At times, especially in the last quarter of the century, European missionaries appealed to their home governments for various degrees of political or military ‘protection’. This was usually in the face of local political conflict, which they felt threatened the safety of their missions. Nevertheless, when European governments responded positively to these appeals, it was usually due more to their own wider strategic or commercial interests.

In the region of modern Malawi, Scottish missionaries had been established to the west of the lake and in the Shire highlands since the mid-1870s. They were aided by a small group of fervent Sotho Christians from Lovedale College in the Cape Colony. Attempts to establish 'Christianity and commerce' as an alternative to the continuing slave trade of the area were aided by the African Lakes Company (ALC). This was a British trading company with strong links to the Scottish evangelical movement. The company supplied cotton cloth and other British manufactured goods in an attempt to undercut the Arab, Swahili and Yao slavers still active in the region. The company hoped to make a handsome profit from the large-scale export of locally hunted ivory (see [Figure 18.3](#)).

Figure 18.3 African Lakes Company (ALC) ivory warehouse, Karonga, 1904. The ALC was funded by missionaries to promote the commercial side of explorer David Livingstone's anti-slavery mantra: 'Christianity and commerce'. The warehouse was built on the site of the headquarters of the slave and ivory trader Mlozi (see [Figure 19.6](#)).



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The slave traders of east-central Africa, however, were well armed and firmly established. The missionaries had little success in promoting Christianity, and the ALC was unable to break the slavers' control of the ivory trade. In the early 1880s, the missionaries and their sponsors in Britain began a series of appeals for some undefined

form of 'British protection' to help suppress the slave trade. But the British government did not act decisively until the late 1880s. Then, they were mainly concerned to prevent the Portuguese of the lower Zambezi valley from restricting British trading access to the Shire highland region. Nevertheless, it was the joint pressure of British missionary and trading interests that helped promote and justify the British declaration of a 'protectorate' over the Shire highlands in 1889.

Similarly, German missionaries in Namibia appealed to their home government for 'protection' in the early 1880s. During a territorial war between Nama and Herero in 1880, their mission and trading activities were badly disrupted. A mission station was destroyed and one German missionary was lucky to escape with his life. Again, it was to safeguard commercial rather than missionary interests that the German government declared a 'protectorate' over 'South West Africa' in 1884. But the long-term presence of German missionaries in the interior provided a degree of public justification for German interest in the region.

In the wider scramble for southern Africa (see [Chapter 22](#)), British missionaries played an active part in promoting the extension of British imperial control. They saw this as preferable to white settler control from colonial South Africa. In Bechuanaland, LMS missionaries urged Tswana rulers to seek British protection as the only way to safeguard their land from seizure by Boers from the Transvaal. The Christian king, Khama, needed no persuasion. One LMS missionary, John Mackenzie, briefly acted as the British government's deputy commissioner for southern Bechuanaland in 1884. He tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent the alienation of Tswana land to white land speculators from the Cape Colony and the Boer republics.

The most ignoble act of missionary imperialism in southern Africa was that of the LMS missionary to the Ndebele. In 1888, Reverend Helm deliberately mistranslated a document for the Ndebele king, Lobengula, in order to enable a group of South African speculators to cheat him into signing away his territory. But Helm was only reflecting the widely held opinions of Christian missionaries in general. After years of unsuccessful effort in Zimbabwe, LMS missionaries openly advocated the overthrow of this powerful 'pagan' king as the only way to achieve a Christian breakthrough. It was only later that they realised the true nature of the monster they had helped unleash in the form of the British South Africa Company.

In the meantime, in the inter-lake region of east Africa, Christian missionaries faced the insecurity of threatened civil war in the Kingdom of Buganda, although much of this unrest was, in fact, being promoted by recent Christian converts seeking to assert political

control. The Anglican CMS, fearing for the survival of its mission in Buganda, set about raising money in Britain. This was used to pay half the cost of maintaining a British military force in the country from 1890 to 1891. The region had already been declared a 'sphere of British influence' through agreement with other European powers, but without military back-up, the precise future of the territory had until now remained uncertain. The CMS action undoubtedly saved their mission. At the same time, it promoted Protestant Christianity at the expense of Catholicism and Islam and it helped smooth the way for the formal declaration of the British Protectorate of Uganda in 1894.



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CHAPTER 19

Central and east Africa in the nineteenth century

Western-central Africa in the nineteenth century

Ever since the late sixteenth century, much of the economic life of western-central Africa had been dominated by the European demand for captives for the transatlantic slave trade. Initially, European declarations of abolition applied only to the north Atlantic, which allowed the export of captives from Angola to Brazil to continue freely for most of the first half of the nineteenth century. But, as elsewhere in west Africa, even the ending of the transatlantic trade did not bring an end to slavery in the central African interior. Indeed, in some respects, internal slavery increased as captive labour was redirected to local production. This was partly to meet the need for more food to feed the growing population.

For centuries, the notorious Atlantic trade had drawn off large numbers of fit young men. Although women were also exported, the trade left, on average, a clear majority of women in a number of African societies. With high female fertility and the widespread practice of male polygamy, it was just about possible for local peoples to maintain population levels. But once slave exports ceased, within the first generation there was a rapid increase in central African populations. This put a strain on the region's natural resources, which were, in any case, subject to periodic drought and shortages of food. Enslaved populations, male and female, were turned to the production of food to meet rising needs.

At the same time, as in west Africa, enforced or enslaved labour was used for the production of alternative exports. This was needed to meet the continuing African demand for imported cloth, firearms and other manufactured goods. Western-central Africa produced small

amounts of palm oil and camwood. But the main export commodities that satisfied the European demand for so-called 'legitimate' commerce were ivory and beeswax.

Chokwe

In the interior of the region, old states crumbled and new groups emerged as a result of the changeover to production for a new type of export trade. The largest and most successful of these new groupings were the Chokwe. The Chokwe originated as full-time hunters in the remote highland regions of Angola. Focusing their imports almost exclusively on firearms, the Chokwe became specialised ivory hunters and collectors of beeswax. They formed armies of professional hunters and strengthened their communities by incorporating captured women, who were pressed into cultivating food as well as collecting and processing beeswax. The Chokwe operated as a series of separate village communities. The maximum size of each group was about 1,000 armed huntsmen together with their women, children and other dependants. Beyond that size they divided into new groups. This meant that the Chokwe were in a state of perpetual expansion in search of new sources of ivory and wax. They expanded north and east towards the fringes of the equatorial forest and, in so doing, absorbed much of the western portion of the crumbling Lunda empire (see [Map 19.1](#)).

Western-central Africa in the nineteenth century

specialists in long-distance trading. This role had been performed by the Imbangala of Kasanje at the height of the slaving period of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, their place was taken by the Ambaquista in the hinterland of Luanda and the Ovimbundu in the hinterland of Benguela (see [Map 19.1](#)). The Ovimbundu in particular organised huge trading caravans and penetrated as far as the upper Zambezi by the 1850s. The Ovimbundu were the main supply link for firearms for the Chokwe exporters of ivory and rubber. Ovimbundu caravaneers who had earlier transported captives for sale used them now as porters in the carrying trade.

Figure 19.1 The rubber industry in the Belgian Congo – thumping rubber to remove particles of wood and fibre. Illustration by Norman Hardy in the Illustrated London News, 2 October 1909.



THE RUBBER INDUSTRY IN THE BELGIAN CONGO: THUMPING RUBBER TO REMOVE PARTICLES OF WOOD AND FIBRE.

The scene here represented is at Miambo, in the Rubutu Country, in the Belgian Congo. During the collecting of the rubber, small particles of wood and hard bits of fibre get into it, and to remove them the rubber balls and sheets are run up into slats and put into racks, which are then beaten by the native workmen with heavy sticks. "While at this work," notes the artist, "they were shouting and laughing, and singing their native love-songs, beating time on the rubber with their sticks. When I made the rough sketch from which this drawing was done, they were singing their own version of 'Where are you going to, my pretty maid!'" As the present time, when the price of rubber has gone up so much, counting, in the case of some firms, an addition of 25 per cent. in an article that is a necessity to every settler—namely, rubber tyres—an illustration showing the early stages of rubber manipulation will, no doubt, be of great interest to many of our readers.

Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

Kingdom of the floodplain *Origins and rise of the Lozi state*

In its upper reaches, the Zambezi River flows from north to south through an open grassy plain. During the second half of the summer

rainy season (November–March), the river swells and floods the plain. The Lozi, originally known as Luyana, adapted their society to gain the maximum benefit from the natural resources of the floodplain. They built their settlements on a series of artificially constructed mounds dotted across the plain. When the surrounding land became flooded, they moved with all their belongings to winter season settlements on the higher dry ground that bordered the western plain. As the waters receded, they moved back to the plain to graze their cattle on refreshed pastures and plant crops in the fertile deposits of the flood.

Organised kingship had developed among the Luyana-speaking people at the northern end of the valley during the course of the seventeenth century. The origins of this development are not clear from Lozi tradition. It was possibly influenced by migrants or ideas from the Lunda ([Chapter 9](#)), but it could also have been a local evolution based on a religious shrine near Kalabo on a tributary of the Zambezi (see [Map 19.1](#)). The king used the title ‘Litunga’. During the course of the eighteenth century, the Lozi expanded their kingdom to cover much of the floodplain region. The Litunga and the aristocracy who ruled the rising state organised enforced or slave labour to build the dwelling mounds and to cut canals for canoe transport and for controlling the waters of the flood. As the Lozi kingdom expanded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an increasing number of captives were used for cultivation and floodplain construction. Lozi commoners too were pressed into various labour projects as well as military service, and a complex bureaucracy was developed in which promotion was based on merit rather than royal connection. The movement from summer floodplain dwelling to dryland winter quarters was under the control of the Litunga. He led the move, riding in a huge royal barge (see [Figures 19.2 and 19.3](#)). The whole procession was developed into an elaborate royal ritual, which is still re-enacted each year in the western province of the modern republic of Zambia.

Figure 19.2 Lewanika I, the Lozi Litunga, in the early 1900s, aboard one of his smaller barges, preparing to depart from his summer dwelling as the annual floodwaters of the Zambezi rise. Once he had transferred into the large, black-and-white-striped royal barge (the *Nalikwanda*), he would formally process along the river to his dryland winter quarters.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Figure 19.3 The Lozi Litunga's royal barge, the *Nalikwanda*, Barotseland, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in the 1950s.



Source: The National Archive.

The Kololo conquest

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the Lozi kingdom

experienced a major political crisis. The upper Zambezi floodplain was invaded by the Kololo in the 1830s. The Kololo were Sotho-speaking venturers who had fled from a period of turmoil in southern Africa (see [Chapter 20](#)). The Kololo, under the able leadership of Sebetwane, established their rule over the southern portion of the kingdom, driving the surviving Lozi royalty to the north. The Kololo supplanted the Lozi as the ruling aristocracy but otherwise left the political system largely intact. However, under the rule of Sebetwane's successor, Sekeletu, the Kololo treated the majority Lozi population as little more than agricultural slaves to farm the floodplain. They taxed them heavily and sold a number to Ovimbundu slave traders in exchange for guns.

The Lozi kingdom in the later nineteenth century

In 1864, the Kololo were overthrown by a Lozi revolution, led by remnants of the Lozi royal family. An important impact of Kololo rule, apart from introducing the Sotho language to the region, was the extension of the boundaries of the kingdom to the south and east. There was a greater emphasis on cattle keeping and a more militaristic element was introduced into Lozi life. Raids against the cattle-keeping Ila of the Kafue valley became a regular practice of the Lozi army. By the 1870s, the military were also being used for hunting elephants for their ivory, which was exchanged for guns with African and European traders who were penetrating from the south. By the later nineteenth century, the Lozi aristocracy were firmly re-established and lived in some luxury. As a sign of social prestige, they grew their fingernails long to show that they did not engage in manual labour. It has been estimated that, in the final decades of the century, up to one-third of the population of the kingdom were serfs or slaves. They worked for the aristocracy or were organised by the Litunga, Lewanika, digging irrigation canals in the floodplain.

The development of long-distance trade in eastern-central Africa

Kazembe's Lunda

An important feature of eastern-central Africa in the early nineteenth century was the development of long-distance trade. We saw in [Chapter 14](#) that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the kingdom of

Kazembe's Lunda had become the central pivot of a long-distance trading network that stretched from one side of the continent to the other. Kazembe accumulated goods for trade by collecting tribute from the regional chiefdoms of his kingdom. Copper was mined extensively in the copper-producing region of the modern *Zambian/Congo copperbelt*, and copper bars circulated within the kingdom as a form of currency. Kazembe's principal exports, apart from copper, were ivory and salt and an increasing number of captives for sale into slavery. Imports from east or west included firearms, European woollens and Indian cotton cloth, shells and beads, and a range of metal manufactured goods from Europe.

Bisa and Bemba

Trade routes to the west were mostly through Mwata Yamvo's Lunda capital Musumba (see [Map 19.1](#)). In the east, the Bisa provided Kazembe's kingdom with its principal trading link to Portuguese traders and settlers in the Zambezi valley. The Bisa became professional traders, although Kazembe siphoned off most of their profits in customs dues and tribute. The Bisa were also subjected to raids by the Bemba. Starting from a region just to the east of Kazembe's kingdom, the Bemba soon grew to dominate the northern region of modern Zambia (see [Map 19.2](#)). They developed a powerful military organisation and, based in stockaded villages, they lived largely from raiding others, especially Bisa trading caravans.

Yao

Meanwhile, south and east of Lake Malawi, the Yao developed from specialist ivory hunters into full-time, long-distance traders. They provided the trading link between the Shire valley of southern Malawi and the coast at the Portuguese port of Mozambique. During the eighteenth century, they opened up further routes to the Swahili port of Kilwa. The trade in ivory and slaves from this ancient port led to a revival of Kilwa in the early nineteenth century. By then, the Yao were trading directly with the Bisa to the west of Lake Malawi.

Prazeros and Chikunda

In the Zambezi valley, the main trading initiative was taken by the *prazeros* and their 'Chikunda' armies. The *prazeros* were descended

from Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese hunters and traders who had settled in the valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Breaking away from Portuguese control, they married local African women and set themselves up as virtual African chiefs. The *prazeros* main sources of power were their large standing armies consisting mostly of captured slaves. Known as Chikunda, they were used for collecting local taxes as well as for hunting, raiding and trading. The *prazeros* controlled vast estates called *prazos* and treated the local African farmers as their subjects. They taxed them heavily and expected them to grow enough food to support the *prazero* and his family and dependants as well as the Chikunda army.

Figure 19.4 Yao slave trader, southern Malawi, in the 1860s. He carries a muzzle-loading musket, with a long knife and a small pot for gunpowder attached to his waist.



Source: 507 collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

With the decline of the Maravi Empire in the eighteenth century, the *prazeros* and their Chikunda grew to dominate the ivory trade of the lower Zambezi valley. Slaves too came to play an increasingly important role in this expanding trading system. Slaves were used as porters to transport ivory to the coast and as soldiers to swell the ranks of the Chikunda armies. And, increasingly in the nineteenth century, slaves themselves became an item of the export trade (see below). By the 1860s, independent Chikunda armies were extending

via the Bemba to Kazembe's Lunda and the copper-producing region to the west of the Luapula. The nineteenth-century development of regular Nyamwezi caravans from northern Zambia to Zanzibar drew off much of the Lunda's ivory and copper trade that had previously been carried southeastwards by the Bisa.

Within the region of modern Kenya, the principal trading nation was the Kamba. They developed important trading links between Kikuyu and the coast. But the Maasai domination of the central Rift valley tended to bar the Kamba access to Buganda and the inter-lake kingdoms.

Invasion from the south: the Ngoni

In the 1830s, the relatively peaceful development of trade in east-central Africa was disrupted by the Ngoni invasions from the south. The Ngoni, like the Kololo, were offshoots from the political turmoil that was going on in southern Africa at this time (see [Chapter 20](#)). The Ngoni impact was so dramatic partly because they introduced into the region an entirely new concept of centralised military organisation. This was based on a system of age-regiments, which cut right across local loyalties and brought all young men into military service for the state. Conquered peoples too were absorbed into the structure. In this way, the Ngoni regiments were formed into highly disciplined and effective armies. Although they carried some guns, they depended mostly on the short stabbing spear and made full use of surprise and shock tactics. Most of their raids were made on unsuspecting villages at dusk or dawn. The Ngoni placed greater emphasis on cattle than on cultivation. When they settled in a region, the regiments were sent out to raid for cattle and to collect tribute in grain and other food.

From about 1832, the Ngoni raided up the lower Zambezi and its Mazoe tributary to cause havoc among the Shona of the Zimbabwe plateau and the remnants of the Mutapa state. In 1835, Zwangendaba, the king (reigned c.1815–48), led the main body of Ngoni, several thousand strong, including Tsonga and Shona adherents, across the Zambezi. One branch of the Ngoni remained behind under the leadership of a remarkable woman named Nyamazana. She raided to the west and attacked the Rozvi capital Manyanga, in the process killing the last Changamire *mambo* Chirisamhuru II in 1836. Nyamazana settled in the region and went on to marry the conquering Ndebele king, Mzilikazi, who entered the region in 1839–40 (see below). She and her small band of Ngoni thus became part of the new Ndebele kingdom.

Zwangendaba, meanwhile, led the main body of Jere-Ngoni northwards as far as the Fipa country of southwestern Tanzania (see [Map 19.2](#)). The success of the Ngoni was heavily dependent on strong leadership, and following the death of Zwangendaba in 1848, the Ngoni broke apart into several separate groups. One raided north through Tanzania, causing considerable disruption and realignment of local peoples. Other Ngoni groups turned southwards and finally settled to the east and west of Lake Malawi. Meanwhile, a separate branch of the Ngoni had moved up the eastern side of Lake Malawi before returning to settle in the Shire region to the south.

By absorbing local people into their ranks, the Ngoni became, in effect, small but powerful centralised local African states. They retained the basic structure of the regimental system, and raiding neighbours and taking tribute by force remained an important part of Ngoni life. Their level of military organisation, discipline and experience enabled the Ngoni of eastern-central Africa to offer among the stoutest resistance to colonial conquest when it came in the closing decade of the century.

A number of eastern and central African peoples learnt from their Ngoni neighbours. Among the more successful of these were the Hehe of southern Tanzania. They adopted an Ngoni-style military structure based on the use of age-regiments. Under the leadership of Munyigumba, the scattered Hehe chiefdoms united into a single centralised state, and so they were able to resist further Ngoni raids. Later, they offered firm resistance to German conquest in the 1890s.

The east African slave trade

We have already seen in earlier chapters that a certain number of Africans had been sold into slavery from the east African coast for many centuries. Most of them had been taken as domestic servants, concubines or plantation workers to Arabia and the Persian Gulf. This trade in people from eastern Africa, however, was mostly on a fairly small scale and it certainly did not dominate the trading system of the east African coast, until, that is, the second half of the eighteenth century.

Long-distance trading routes of the east African interior in the nineteenth century



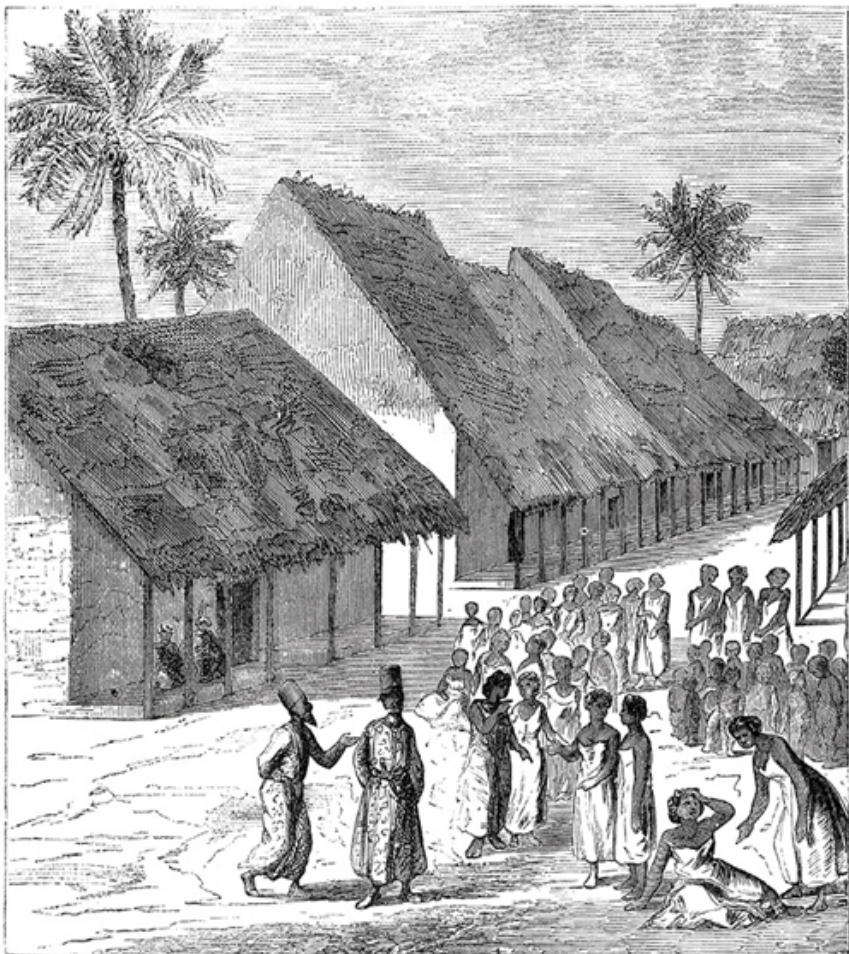
A number of factors intervened to transform the scale of the traffic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, the French opened sugar and spice plantations on their Indian Ocean colonies of Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles. Initially, they bought their slave workers from Portuguese and Indian traders in the Zambezi valley, at Quelimane and at Mozambique Island. With the rapid expansion of sugar plantations in the 1770s, and the high death rate on the island colonies due to brutality, overwork and harsh conditions, the French looked further afield for their supply of slave labour. They turned to Arab and Swahili traders at Kilwa and Zanzibar (see Map 17.3). The Yao became major suppliers of slave labour raided from the Kilwa and Mozambique hinterland. The Yao were even known to sell fellow Yao into slavery.

In the early nineteenth century, a second factor came into play. By

then, the Brazilians had found that they were not getting enough slave labour from the Atlantic coastline, partly because of the activities of the British West Africa Squadron and partly because of an expansion of sugar plantations in Brazil itself. With the shortage of slaves for sale in the Americas, the price of slaves rose. The higher profit margin now made it worthwhile for Brazilian slavers to make the much longer trip around the Cape to the Indian Ocean coast. Most of their slaves were purchased from the Zambezi valley and Mozambique region.

Finally, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, there was a rapid growth in the Arab demand for slaves to man their plantations on Zanzibar and surrounding islands. Arab domination of the northern coastal trade had been growing ever since their expulsion of the Portuguese from Fort Jesus and Mombasa in 1696–8. For most of the eighteenth century, Portuguese traders were confined to the more southern coastal towns. By the early nineteenth century, the sultans of Oman had extended direct control over many of the Swahili cities of the northern coastal region. In the 1820s, Sultan Seyyid Said encouraged Arabs to set up clove plantations on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. The plantations were, of course, worked by slave labour from the mainland. This part of the Omani economy became so successful that in 1840 Seyyid Said moved his capital from Oman to Zanzibar. There followed a rapid increase in the slave trade from the mainland to Zanzibar and the island hosted the largest slave market along the east African coast ([Figure 19.5](#)).

Figure 19.5 The slave market at Zanzibar. Under threat of bombardment from the British navy, the sultan of Zanzibar was forced to close the slave market in 1873. Sketch by Lieut. Henn of the Livingstone Relief Expedition, *Illustrated London News*, 8 June 1872.



IN THE SLAVE MARKET, ZANZIBAR.

Source: BenoitB/iStock.

It has been estimated that at the peak of the trade in the 1860s, east Africa was exporting up to 70,000 slaves a year. The trade in people continued all along the coast, despite the activities of the anti-slavery squadron.

In 1873, the British persuaded the sultan of Zanzibar to close the island's slave market. By then, however, the European demand for ivory was reaching a new peak. Previously, most east African exports of ivory had gone to India and China. Now the highest demand came from Europe. The increasingly wealthy middle classes of industrialised Europe were using ivory for billiard balls, piano keys and the handles of their cutlery. By the 1870s, the auction houses of London had become the world's largest single market for the sale of African ivory. Fewer human captives were now exported from east Africa. But all

along the trade routes of the interior, innocent men and women were still being captured and forced to carry tusks of ivory to the coast.

The trade in ivory and slaves in the interior of central Africa

Between the 1860s and 1880s, the east African markets for ivory and slaves pushed their destructive tentacles far into the interior of central Africa. Their agents transformed the nature of the region's long-distance trading networks and, unknowingly, prepared the ground for the colonial conquest that followed in their wake.

Figure 19.6 Mlozi and his slave raiders, Karonga, Lake Malawi, 1890. Mlozi bin Kazbadema, a slave and ivory trader, took captives around the northern region of Lake Malawi and sold them into slavery in the region, long after the closure of the slave market in Zanzibar.



Source: KGPA Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

The *prazeros* of the lower Zambezi valley were quick to respond to the rising demand for slaves in the course of the nineteenth century. We have already seen how independent bands of Chikunda had

extended their hunting and raiding to the middle Zambezi valley. On the prazos of the lower Zambezi, the *prazeros* resorted to selling their own subjects and even at times their Chikunda armies. This hastened the break-up of the multitude of small-scale prazos. By the middle of the century, the few that survived had consolidated into a small number of 'supraprazos', the main ones being Makanga, Massangano and Massingire (see [Map 19.3](#)). They became more firmly African in their ethnicity and outlook and as such provided strong opposition to Portuguese colonial conquest in the 1880s.

To the north of the lower Zambezi, Chikunda, Yao and Ngoni raids spread bloodshed and chaos throughout the previously prosperous farming regions of modern Malawi and eastern Zambia. By the 1870s and 80s, small-scale farming communities all over eastern-central Africa were having to live in stockaded villages for their own protection.

British Christian missionaries were attracted to the region, inspired by the anti-slavery appeals of David Livingstone. But their failure to replace the violence of the slave and ivory trade with 'Christianity and commerce', Livingstone's mantra, led the missionaries to appeal for British government intervention. The role of these and other missionaries will be discussed in [Chapter 22](#).

Swahili traders in the east African interior

As coastal demand for slaves and ivory rose, Swahili and Nyamwezi hunter/traders moved ever-deeper into the interior in search of these 'commodities'. Financed by Zanzibari or Indian merchants, they travelled in well-armed caravans of several hundred or even a thousand men and women. They exploited the weaknesses of old-established states and set up permanent bases in the central African interior. Like the Yao in the south, the Nyamwezi were the pioneers of this movement north of Lake Malawi. Swahili caravaneers followed Nyamwezi routes and were well established at Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika by the late 1830s (see [Map 19.3](#)). From there, they crossed the lake in the 1840s to collect ivory and captives from the eastern fringes of the Congo forest. By then, the Nyamwezi were penetrating far to the west of the Tanganyika-Malawi corridor.



The extent to which Arab immigrants or the Swahili were the region's predominant trading figures in this era remains a topic of some debate. There is more discussion of this within the related debate mentioned in [Chapter 10](#), 'Swahili Historiography "Arab or African"' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

Msiri and the Yeke

In the 1850s, Msiri, a Nyamwezi trader, established a permanent inland base west of the Luapula. The Kazembe kingdom was suffering the crisis of a civil war, which Msiri was able to exploit to his advantage. From his capital at Bunkeya (see [Map 19.3](#)), he expanded his initial holding into a raiding/trading state composed of a number of heavily fortified villages. As the Nyamwezi expanded their control, they absorbed other peoples and began calling themselves by the local name 'ba-Yeke'. From their position in the heart of the copper-producing country, Msiri's Yeke drew off most of the tribute from the western regions of the Kazembe kingdom. They established contact further west with Chokwe and Ovimbundu. In this way, they benefited from both eastern and western connections as Kazembe's Lunda had before them. Msiri used the region's resources of ivory and copper to build up a considerable arsenal of firearms, which he bought from Ovimbundu in the west and Swahili in the east. It was his command of the copper resources of the region that attracted British and Belgian colonists to Bunkeya in 1890–1.

Tippu Tip and the eastern Congo basin

Meanwhile, the most famous of the Swahili traders of the central African interior had established himself west of Lake Tanganyika. His name was Hamed bin Muhammed, commonly known as 'Tippu Tip' ([Figure 19.7](#)). He started his hunting and raiding career among Msiri's Nyamwezi. During the 1860s, he established himself at the Swahili bases of Nyangwe and Kasongo on the Lualaba (upper Congo) River. From here he was able to maintain direct trading contact through Ujiji and Tabora to Zanzibar (see [Map 19.3](#)). This kept him supplied with firearms with which to hunt in the forest and raid surrounding

villages. In doing so, he virtually destroyed the ancient Songye towns of the upper Lualaba and seriously weakened the declining Luba empire.

Considering his 'kingdom' as the western outpost of the Zanzibari sultanate, Tippu Tip built a trading empire for himself, which stretched from the Luba in the south to the great westward bend of the upper Congo River. By the early 1880s, Tippu Tip's army was several thousand strong, but he was merely the overlord of an informal federation of hunting/raiding bands. His close companions were Swahili and Muslim Nyamwezi who commanded their own bands of armed retainers. Tippu Tip and his companions hunted elephants deep into the Congo forest, and raided villages for food and captives. Captured women were taken as concubines, while men were used as porters and despatched along the route to Zanzibar. Both men and women were used as agricultural labour to tend the plantations of sugar cane, rice or maize that surrounded the towns of Kasongo and Nyangwe. Any 'surplus' captives were usually ransomed locally in exchange for ivory. The cheapness of human life to Tippu Tip and his companions is illustrated by an observation in the journal on 7 November 1876 of the Welsh journalist and explorer H.M. Stanley:

Figure 19.7 Portrait of 'Tippu Tip' (Hamed bin Muhammed) (c.1837–1905), slave and ivory raider/trader and sometime agent of the sultan of Zanzibar.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

A sheep is said to purchase one [tusk of] ivory, 12 slaves purchase an ivory. In Ujiji 6 slaves purchase an ivory. 'Slaves cost nothing' said Hamed bin Mohammed, 'they only require to be gathered.' And that is the work of Muini Dugumbi and Mtagamoyo [Tippu Tip's companions]. ...

They attack the simple peoples of Nyangwe right and left 12 or 15

slaves then caught are sold for 35 pounds (16 kilos) of ivory. Muini Dugumbi has one hundred to one hundred and twenty women. Mtagamoyo has 60.¹

It should be noted that Stanley himself, by his own admission, was not averse to shooting Africans dead at the slightest provocation.

Swahili penetration of the lake regions of eastern Africa

By the 1870s and 80s, Swahili traders from the coast were dominating the major trading routes between the coast and the interior, and had virtually taken over the Nyamwezi trading capital of Tabora. Well-armed Swahili trading caravans even penetrated beyond Kikuyu country and through the northern fringes of Maasai territory to do business with cattle pastoralists and ivory hunters to the west of Lake Turkana.

From the 1860s, a small number of Swahili traders were allowed to settle at the Buganda capital northwest of the Victoria Nyanza. But they were never able to develop there the sort of freedom to raid and trade that they exercised elsewhere. Mutesa I (r. 1856–84), the powerful Buganda kabaka (ruler), kept their activities under his control. The Baganda aristocracy were keen to acquire the cotton cloth and guns that the Swahili traders had to offer. So they themselves sent out their own hunters and raiders to collect the ivory and captives that the Swahili sought. The latter played the role of middlemen between Buganda and the coast. At the same time, Baganda canoeists were opening up further trading contacts on the southern shores of the Victoria Nyanza.

Within western Tanzania, the Nyamwezi responded to increasing domination of their trading routes by Swahili from the coast. Mirambo, Nyamwezi trader and warlord, created an extensive trading empire which operated over much of west-central Tanzania, while a further Nyamwezi leader, Nyungu, established central political control over the previously disunited Kimbu further south. Both were successful trading states whose activities confined the Swahili in western Tanzania to the well-worn trading routes and towns such as Tabora and Ujiji.

For much of the nineteenth century, the economic life of eastern-central Africa had been disrupted and dominated by the violence of the trade in firearms, ivory and captives. Apart from the wealth gained by individual traders and rulers, the vast majority of central African peoples saw little of the benefit from the trade. The

persistence of slavery and the slave trade, and the dislocation of people that went with it, provided potential European colonists with both the opportunity and an excuse to intervene in the region. Thus, the peoples of east and central Africa found to their cost that they were exchanging one form of slavery for another.

Madagascar: the rise of the Merina Kingdom

The arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth century transformed the balance of power on the island of Madagascar. The southern Malagasy kingdoms had hitherto played little direct role in the Indian Ocean trading networks. The development of European shipping to India via southern Africa gave the southern Malagasy rulers the opportunity to provide visiting ships with food (especially rice) and slaves. A further international boost to the Malagasy economy occurred with the eighteenth-century French development of plantation slavery on their island colonies of Mauritius and Reunion.

Supplying the provisioning and slave trade for these French colonies prompted the growth of the Merina Kingdom in the central plateau from the late eighteenth century. The Merina kings used a regulated system of forced labour to service their growing imperial state. Forced labour provided military service as well as state-controlled agricultural and industrial production. The latter, the most systematic attempt to establish an industrial revolution in precolonial Africa, used the water power of the country's numerous mountainous rivers to drive machinery. Industrialisation focused mainly on the production of military hardware: muskets, cannon and ammunition. A large centralised industrial complex was built by 20,000 forced labourers and maintained by a permanent workforce of 5,000.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Merina Kingdom extended to the whole of the central highlands and eastern half of Madagascar. But at the height of its power, the imperial nature of the Merina state contained the seeds of its own downfall. Christianity had been adopted as the state religion in the 1820s, and Church and schools both recruited forced labour for the state.

The ban on slave exports and increasing direct competition from French trading settlements on the north coast weakened the Merina economy during the mid-nineteenth century. The military struggle against persistent French incursions from the north bankrupted the Merina state from the 1870s. Their Malagasy subjects seized the opportunity to foment numerous rebellions against the state's forced

labour demands. The oppressive Merina ruling class became so discredited and unpopular that the numerically strong Merina army was in disarray. And although the French invading force suffered massively from disease, when they finally entered the Merina capital in 1895, they did so virtually unopposed.

Within months of the French seizure of power in the Merina capital, the Malagasy rose up in revolt, known as the *Menalamba* ('red shawl') revolt, because the white shawls (*lamba*) commonly worn by the Malagasy, and normally kept so clean, became stained by the red laterite soil of central Madagascar. The rebellion lasted for two years (1895–7) and has commonly been portrayed as one of the first great nationalist rebellions against French imperialism. Recent historical scholarship, however, has argued that the Menalamba revolt was more of a rebellion against state oppression, be it French colonial or Merina precolonial. The rebels did not attack the French as such; rather, they targeted the structures and personnel of the Merina administrative system, which the French proposed to re-establish. Thus they attacked the Church, the schools and the administrators of the forced labour system. Although the rebellion was crushed in 1897, local resistance continued, and it was not until 1905 that the French brought the whole of Madagascar under full colonial control.



The ongoing debate over the motivation behind the Menalamba revolt is addressed at greater length in 'The Menalamba Revolt' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates



Visit the online resources at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/student-zone

Chapter 20

Preindustrial southern Africa in the nineteenth century

State building and conflict, early nineteenth century

Historiography of the mfecane/difaqane

The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a demographic upheaval that accompanied a dramatic and violent realignment of African states in the interior of southern Africa. In colonial historiography (and in South African state schools until the end of the twentieth century), this was depicted as a period of ‘savage tribal warfare’, initiated by the rapid rise of Shaka’s Zulu Kingdom. In this historiography, Shaka was the unbridled tyrant at the centre of the mayhem. This view was heavily influenced by the published evidence of two British traders at Port Natal – Henry Francis Fynn and Nathaniel Isaacs – despite the latter freely admitting that he had exaggerated his account for dramatic effect. In what became known as the *mfecane* (the ‘crushing’), it was claimed that Shaka’s regiments devastated the region – driving people to starvation and cannibalism – to the extent that the territory south of the Tugela River became an ‘empty land’, and thus (conveniently) available for white settlement. In due course, this historiography became a justification for what became, in the 1840s, the colony of Natal. It was further related that the total and ‘constant warfare’ of the Zulu Kingdom drove refugees and raiders across the Drakensburg onto the highveld, where they set in motion a *difaqane* (‘scattering’) that caused similar levels of starvation and cannibalism and making ‘empty land’ available for subsequent occupation by emigrants Boers from the eastern Cape Colony.

In 1966, the historian John Omer-Cooper, writing from the

perspective of teaching at universities in newly independent Africa, brought an Africanist interpretation to these events. He accepted the Zulu origins of conflict and the levels of devastation of the *mfecane/difaqane* at face value, but he attempted to bring a positive gloss to the rise of the Zulu Kingdom. He praised Shaka's strength of leadership and his military genius. But the main focus of Omer-Cooper's book was in the title: *The Zulu Aftermath*. He detailed the significant new African states that were founded as a result of these various conflicts and migrations: Gaza in Mozambique, the Ndebele in Zimbabwe and the Ngoni in eastern central Africa. The book appealed to the then current Africanist historiography and so strengthened the acceptance of Zulu ultimate responsibility for what was still seen as widespread devastation. At the same time, it appealed to Zulu nationalists who saw much to praise in the dramatic rise of their nation.



The various conflicting interpretations of the *mfecane/difaqane* era are discussed at greater length in 'The Mfecane Debate' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/debates

The struggle for power and stability on the lowveld

Following Omer-Cooper's lead, other historians examined the *mfecane/difaqane* more closely and began looking beyond the despotic character of Shaka in their search for other possible contributors to the rise of the Zulu Kingdom and its impact on their neighbours and environment. The focus shifted from the Zulu as initiators to the three main states of the Nguni lowveld at the end of the eighteenth century: Sobhuza's Ngwane, Zwile's Ndwandwe and Dingiswayo's Mthethwa. The Zulu at the time were a minor clan within the Mthethwa confederation of chiefdoms. The themes that emerged in the historiography of the late 1960s through to the early 1980s included the possible contribution of the ivory trade at Delagoa Bay to heightened competition for hunting resources in the region; the growth of maize cultivation and the consequent rise in population that accompanied the late eighteenth century period of favourable rainfall; and the contribution of the latter to better pastures and a rapid growth in the numbers of cattle. From the 1810s, there was an

increasing market for cattle to provision American whaling ships calling at Delagoa Bay. All of this heightened competition between the main states, especially during the period of sustained drought with which the nineteenth century opened.

It was thought at one time that efforts to supply the slave trade might have contributed to the conflicts of the 1810s. But the evidence shows that the slave trade did not become significant at Delagoa Bay until the 1820s when Brazilian slavers ventured round to southern Mozambique to supply the transatlantic trade.

By the 1810s, Sobhuza's Ngwane had been pushed north of the Pongola River (the present southern border of Swaziland) as Zwide's Ndwandwe attempted to dominate the whole of the region south of the river. This seemed to be achieved in 1818, when the Ndwandwe defeated the Mthethwa in what was seen to be a decisive battle. Dingiswayo was killed and with his loss the Mthethwa confederation began to disintegrate. At that point, the leader of Dingiswayo's Zulu regiments, the much-favoured Shaka kaSenzangakhona (c.1787–1828), seized his opportunity. He gathered the major Mthethwa chiefdoms into a defensive alliance and beat off an initial Ndwandwe attack. Zwide followed up that initial failure by sending the cream of his army against the Zulu upstart. Shaka withdrew ahead of the Ndwandwe advance, taking all the alliance's cattle and food with him. Then, with the Ndwandwe regiments weakened by lack of food, Shaka launched a series of assaults that inflicted a decisive defeat on the Ndwandwe and sent them into full retreat north of the Pongola.

At this point, the major Ndwandwe regimental leaders split from Zwide, abandoning him with his immediate followers around the headwaters of the Nkomati River. Soshangane led his regiments into southern Mozambique north of Delagoa Bay where he founded what became known as the Gaza Empire. Zwangendaba and other regimental leaders took their tightly disciplined regiments northwards into Zimbabwe and eastern central Africa where they became known as Ngoni (see [Chapter 18](#)).

The Zulu Kingdom under Shaka

This left Shaka, by 1819, as the major power between the Pongola and Tugela Rivers. For most of the next decade he vigorously expanded his kingdom. He extended his control through the Drakensberg foothills and sent his regiments to exact tribute from the peoples of the southern region between the Tugela and Mzimkulu Rivers, the area that was later to become the colony of Natal.

In the old historiography, Shaka was credited with a myriad of military innovations, including the use of the short stabbing spear for close quarters fighting and the 'cow-horn' military formation for encircling the enemy. Close investigation of the evidence, however, has revealed that both of these 'innovations' had, in fact, been developed and were in use in the region's warfare *before* the rise of the Zulu Kingdom. Before the 1790s, the favoured weapon of Nguni regiments had been the throwing spear. Each soldier would carry several of these and, when just about within range, each side would hurl their spears against their opponents and keep doing this until one side gave way and withdrew. The victors would then round up whatever cattle and other loot they could capture. What the stabbing spear introduced was the concept of 'total warfare', as practised, in particular, by Zwibe's Ndwandwe. The aim now was no longer to drive off and loot one's opponent; but, rather, to kill as many of the enemy as possible, to destroy their settlements and to kill or carry off their women and children. While Shaka may not have been the initiator of these tactics, he drilled and disciplined his regiments more professionally and more thoroughly than most regimental leaders hitherto. The methodical use of speed, spies and surprise may have been a Shaka innovation.

The historiography of the rise of the Zulu Kingdom and the *mfecane* may have rested at that, but in the late 1980s, a group of South African historians began questioning whether or not the *mfecane* itself ever really happened. They suggested that the whole idea of a savagely destructive *mfecane* – as still taught in South Africa's state schools – was no more than a propaganda myth, invented by colonially minded whites and their modern racist sympathisers. The persistence of the myth, argued these historians, was to provide a justification for nineteenth-century colonisation and, by implication, the modern apartheid state. The challenge caused some controversy, but it led to a thorough re-evaluation of the available evidence and new examinations of local oral traditions, many of them recorded in the nineteenth century, but not intensively examined at the time. Now a new, more subtle historiography began to emerge.

It used to be claimed, including in previous editions of this book, that Shaka developed a highly centralised state in which the king had absolute authority. In newly conquered regions, it was claimed, hereditary chiefs were replaced by royal officials (*indunas*), directly responsible to the king. In fact, that idea was drawn from the system introduced by British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. In Shaka's time, the *indunas* were regimental leaders, appointed by the king. Local political authority remained in the hands of hereditary

chiefs, as it was during Dingiswayo's Mthethwa reign. It was this structure of local support that had enabled Shaka to quickly gain unchallenged control of the Zulu chieftdom and use it as a base to meld together a confederation of territorial chieftdoms into what became the Zulu Kingdom. On the other hand, this federal structure of local chiefly control enabled Mzilikazi of the Khumalo chieftdom to move away onto the highveld in 1822 and found the Ndebele Kingdom (see below).

The regiments, under the *indunas*, were the key to the Zulu king's authority, not only in military terms, but also in terms of his economic and ecological control. Besides performing military duties, male and female regiments were also involved in production for the state. The men herded the king's cattle and hunted for ivory, while the women cultivated the king's fields. Regimental towns, based on the pattern of a central cattle enclosure (see [Figure 20.1](#)), were established at strategic positions around the kingdom. It was only after spending a number of years in the king's service that regiments were disbanded and their members allowed to marry and set up their own homesteads. Even then, they always remained liable to military call-up. In this way, the regimental system served to break down regional identities and foster loyalty to the Zulu king. Nevertheless, local identities and dialects persisted and it was not until faced with colonial invasion in the 1870s that the bulk of the people began thinking of themselves as 'Zulu'.

So far as the region south of the Tugela was concerned, it has now been clearly shown that the idea that this was an 'empty land', depopulated by marauding Zulu armies, was a myth. A close examination of recorded evidence shows that there were realignments of chieftdoms, some seeking the protection of others, leaving some areas more densely populated and others temporarily vacated. The core zone of the Zulu Kingdom lay between the Pongola and Tugela Rivers ([Map 20.1](#)). South of the Tugela was a tributary zone of the Zulu state. Tribute raids further afield were sometimes successful, sometimes not. Some of the most devastating battles depicted in Zulu tradition were little more than skirmishes or action against minor transgressors. And there is no credible evidence for the cannibalism claimed in the colonial literature. That appears to have been a stereotypical assumption, or deliberate propaganda slur.

Figure 20.1 Mgungundlovu, the Zulu capital in the reign of Dingane (Shaka's half-brother and successor), 1838. The artist depicts an imagined record of the moment that Dingane ordered the killing of Piet

Retief and his Boer delegation that had come to the Zulu capital to claim the right to settle south of the Tugela.



Source: South African Picture Framing Company, Cape Town.

Nevertheless, the Zulu raids were serious enough to prompt the Hlubi and the Ngwane of Matiwane (who were distinct from the Ngwane of Sobhuza), in the foothills of the Drakensberg, to withdraw from the region and migrate through mountain passes onto the highveld in 1820–1 (see below).

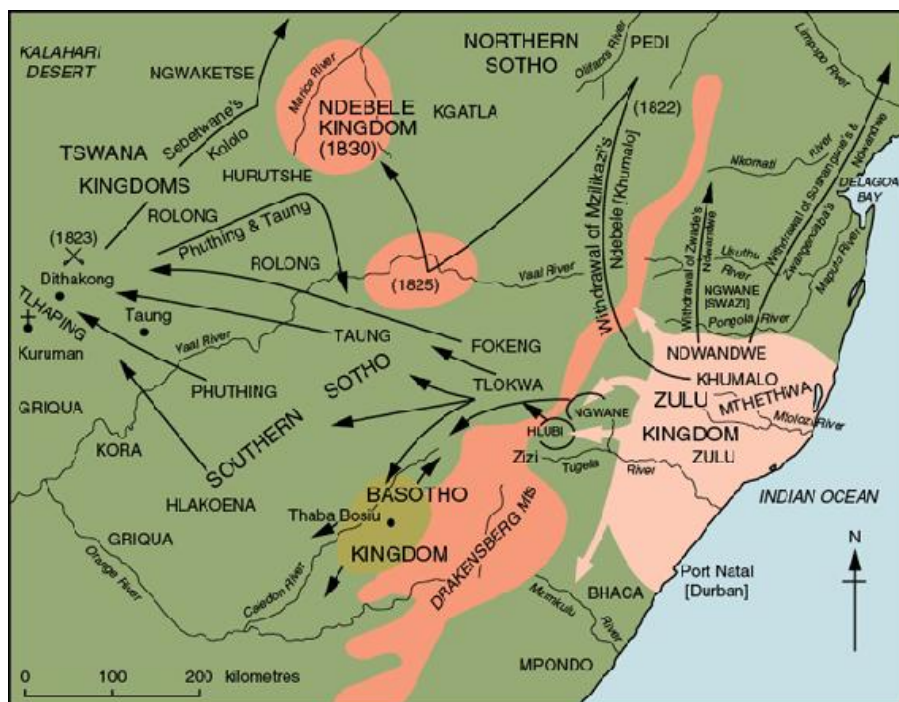
The end of Shaka's reign

Shaka's practice of arbitrary justice and numerous executions meant that he was greatly feared rather than respected as a ruler; and when he was assassinated by his half-brother Dingane in 1828, there was little if any hostile reaction from the people. Dingane proclaimed himself king and ensured his security on the throne by killing any potential rivals, including a half-brother who had assisted in the assassination.

It had taken Shaka a mere ten years to create the Zulu Kingdom. And within just ten years of his death it had reached the verge of destruction. Dingane lacked the military prowess and leadership qualities of Shaka; but it is doubtful whether even Shaka could have coped any better with the problems that confronted his successor. Some of Dingane's major problems were inherited. The power and

unity of Shaka's kingdom had been built very largely on a perpetual stream of successful tribute raids that brought in a continual supply of fresh cattle and young men for the regiments. During the final years of Shaka's reign, that success was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Potential rivals had withdrawn further afield, and were learning to defend themselves more effectively. Indeed, the army was returning from a defeat by the Gaza state of Soshangane when they learned of Shaka's death. But the greatest problem that Dingane had to face was not of his own nor Shaka's making. This was the invasion of the lowveld in 1837–8 by armed and mounted Boers who had invaded the highveld from the Cape Colony and now came down through the passes of the Drakensberg in search of new land to take for white settlement (see below).

The rise of the Zulu Kingdom and the *difaqane* on the highveld, 1818–35

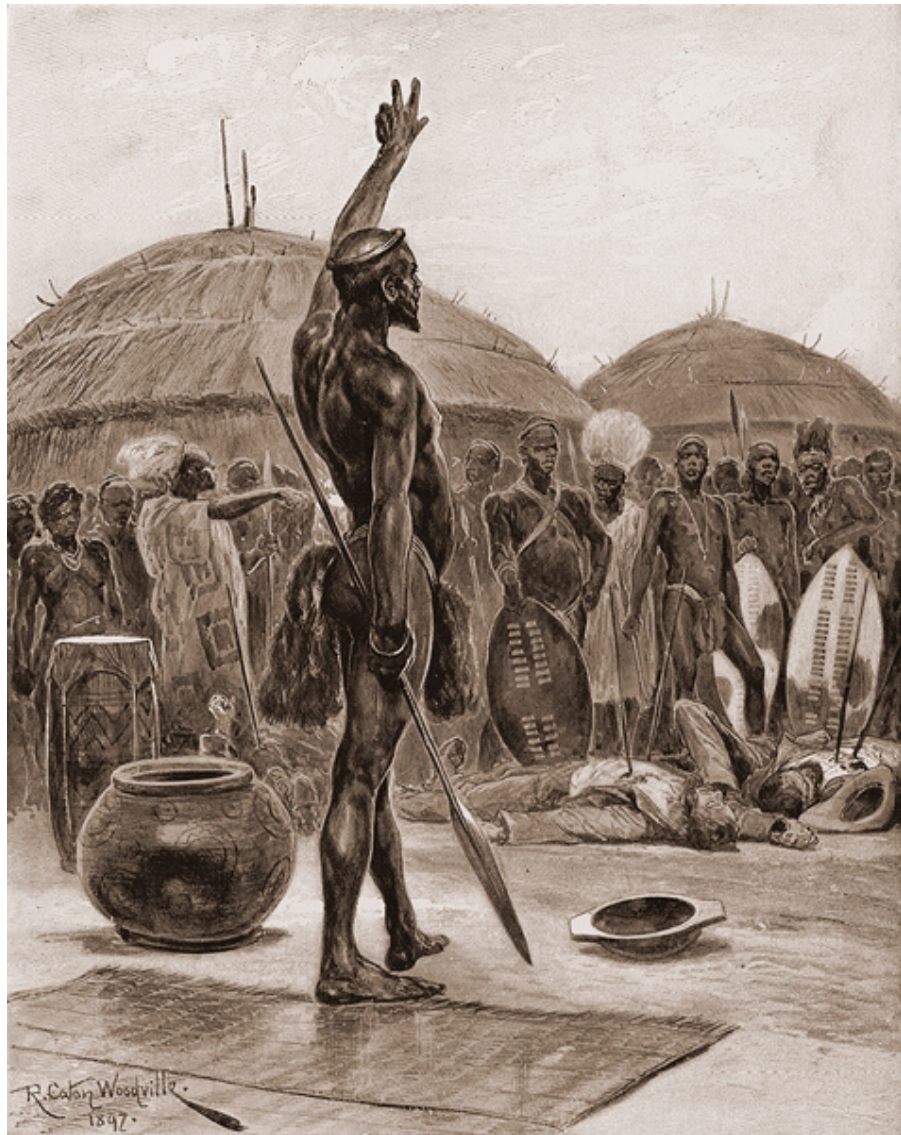


The struggle for power and stability on the highveld

In the early nineteenth century, the Sotho of the southern highveld lived in numerous small and independent chiefdoms. There was a

particular concentration of settlements in the fertile and well-watered valley of the Caledon. Each chiefdom had its own system of initiation age-regiments. These were used for public works as well as military purposes, but they were only summoned as need arose. The raiding of cattle between one chiefdom and another was common, but warfare of this kind was not particularly destructive. Chiefdoms were seldom totally impoverished by the raids. One particularly notorious cattle raider was Moshoeshoe (Moshweshwe) of the Mokoteli clan (see below). His name was in imitation of the ‘swish-swish’ sound of shaving, a metaphor for the way he ‘shaved’ his rivals of their cattle.

Figure 20.2 An artist’s impression of Dingane kaSenzangakhona (c.1795–1840) addressing his people over the bodies of Piet Retief and his party whom he had just ordered to be executed, 6 February 1838. Painted 59 years later on the eve of the Anglo–Boer War by the English artist Richard Caton Woodville Jr. More contemporary images of Dingane show him to be somewhat plump and not at all the athletic image shown here.



Source: Stock Montage/Getty Images.

When the Hlubi and Ngwane crossed the Drakensberg onto the highveld in 1821–2, they came with few cattle, having lost most of their herds to Zulu tribute raids. But they found the small Sotho chiefdoms easy prey for their battle-hardened regiments and short stabbing spears. Initially, the Hlubi fell upon the Tlokwa, seizing their cattle and driving them to attack the Sotho chiefdoms of the upper Caledon valley. Although these raids undoubtedly caused much destruction and instability, the extent of devastation has, in the past, often been exaggerated. Conflict and cattle raids were nothing new to the area. The new, and most dangerous, element of the time was raids

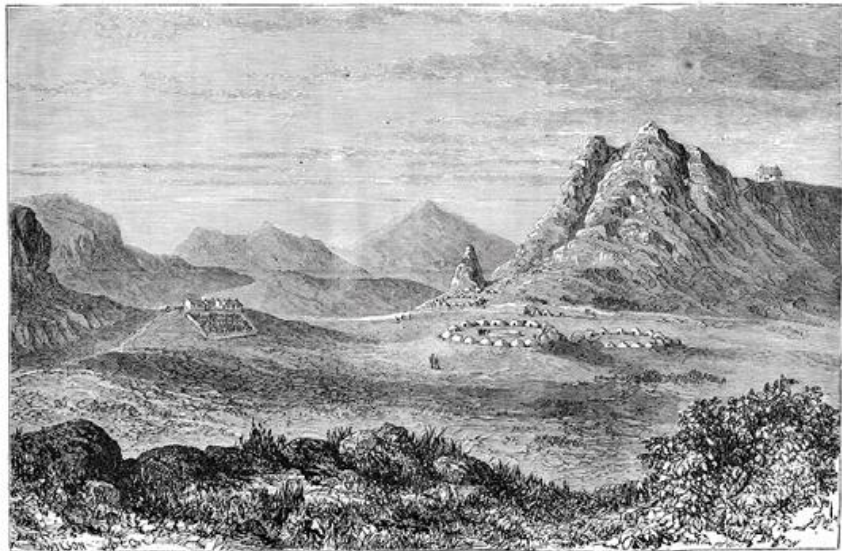
from the south by small bands of mounted Griqua and Kora, armed with guns from the Cape Colony. They raided up the Orange and Caledon valleys, looting villages, seizing cattle and taking people captive to sell into slavery in the Cape Colony.

As with the *mfecane* east of the Drakensberg, this period has traditionally been referred to as the *difaqane*, ‘the scattering’, and there was indeed widespread conflict, but, at the same time, a number of strong leaders emerged who seized the opportunity to build powerful new states in the region. Far more devastating in the long term was the invasion of Boer settlers from the Cape Colony who caused havoc on the highveld from the late 1830s and, in effect, extended the so-called *difaqane* by several decades (see below).

Moshoeshoe and the rise of the Sotho kingdom

In the troubled times of 1821–3, Moshoeshoe (c.1786–1870) established his Mokoteli headquarters on the slopes of a mountain to the east of the upper Caledon. Here, he quickly gained a reputation as an able military leader and minor chiefdoms and displaced people willingly came under his protection. In 1824, after suffering several major attacks from Tlokwa and Ngwane, Moshoeshoe moved his following of several thousand people to the larger, flat-topped mountain of Thaba-Bosiu (Figure 20.3). This was a strong defensive position, able to withstand a lengthy siege. It had access to good grazing and fresh water and commanded the surrounding valley.

Figure 20.3 The approach to Moshoeshoe's flat-topped mountain stronghold of Thaba-Bosiu, which stretches away to the right of the picture.



Source: SOTK2011/Alamy Stock Photo.

Figure 20.4 Moshoeshoe (in top hat) and counsellors in the 1860s.



Source: ART Collection/Alamy Stock Photo .

From this secure central capital, Moshoeshoe built up a new and powerful Sotho kingdom as a confederation of semi-independent chiefdoms. As chiefdoms sought his protection, Moshoeshoe incorporated them into the expanding kingdom. Hereditary chiefs were left in place and remained responsible for raising their own age-regiments. They were merely required to acknowledge Moshoeshoe's overall authority, support the kingdom with regiments when required and send tribute to the capital. Moshoeshoe cemented relations within the kingdom by a complex system of marriage alliances. He himself had many wives and children, and most Sotho chiefly families were related to the king in one way or another. While this aided the stability of the kingdom at the time, it was to sow the seed of many problems in the future, even into the postcolonial state of the late

twentieth century.

Moshoeshoe was not averse to raiding weaker neighbours to build up his herds of cattle and expand his kingdom, but he also recognised the strength of certain powerful neighbours. Thus, he paid tribute in cattle to Matiwane's Ngwane and sent feathers and furs as presents to Shaka. He even sent a gift of cattle to the Ndebele after repelling one of their attacks. It was only after Zulu attacks had weakened the Ngwane in 1827 that Moshoeshoe scattered the remnants of this enemy and drove them southwards into Thembuland. Here, they added to the pressure that region was already suffering from the relentless colonial expansion of the eastern Cape.

In the early 1830s, Moshoeshoe invited missionaries from the Cape Colony to come and settle in his kingdom. His motives were political and economic rather than religious. He recognised that the main threat to Sotho security came from the raids by bands of mounted Griqua and Kora from the northern border regions of the Cape Colony. Moshoeshoe hoped that friendly relations with white Christians from the Cape Colony would help stave off these attacks as well as provide the Sotho with access to a trade in firearms and horses. In the latter respect, Moshoeshoe's policy succeeded. In the 1830s and 40s, Sotho imports of horses and guns enabled the kingdom to become one of the most formidable African powers in southern Africa.

Conflict on the western highveld

While the growth of the Sotho kingdom brought a certain level of stability to the eastern highveld, conflict was spreading to the Tswana of the western regions. Attracted by the southern Tswana's large herds of cattle, dislocated groups of Fokeng, Hlakoena and Taung converged on the Tlhaping capital of Dithakong in 1823. The Tlhaping appealed to the missionary Robert Moffat to bring the Griqua and their firearms to their assistance. In the event, 100 armed and mounted Griqua managed to disperse the Sotho from the environs of Dithakong. The reputation of the missionaries, as allies of the men with guns, was greatly enhanced by this event.

Following their expulsion from Dithakong, Hlakoena and Taung raided further among the Tswana before returning to resettle south of the River Vaal. A group of Fokeng, however, who had held back from Dithakong under the able leadership of Sebetwane, raided northwards through the northern Tswana states between the Kalahari and Limpopo. Known as 'Kololo', Sebetwane's compact band of raiders overcame many difficulties and near-destruction in the desert before conquering and settling in the Lozi kingdom of the upper Zambezi

valley (see [Chapter 19](#)).

Mzilikazi and the founding of the Ndebele Kingdom

The only major Nguni state to be founded on the highveld was the Kingdom of the Ndebele. They originated from the Khumalo clan, former allies of the Ndwandwe. Following the defeat of the Ndwandwe, the Khumalo came nominally under the authority of Shaka. Rather than submit to the Zulu king, the chief of the Khumalo, Mzilikazi, led the core of his fighting regiments on to the highveld in 1822. Here, they raided among the northern and central Sotho before settling in the 1830s around the Marico River basin (near the southeastern border of modern Botswana). The Sotho called them 'Matabele', a name which the Khumalo themselves adapted to 'Amandebele' or 'Ndebele'.

Mzilikazi built up a powerful centralised kingdom through a combination of Zulu-style regiments and fighting methods and the absorption of large numbers of Sotho-Tswana men and women. A number of regimental villages were established to keep order in the districts, to collect tribute from the villages and to tend the king's herds. Neighbouring independent states were expected to offer tribute, and if they did not pay, they suffered crushing raids. The core of the Ndebele Kingdom was relatively calm and peaceful, but raids in search of tribute ranged far among the Tswana and reached the southern Sotho south of the River Vaal.

Figure 20.5 Ndebele town, showing cattle enclosure, in the 1890s.



The Ndebele's expulsion from the highveld in 1837 was the culmination of a series of raids against them from the south. Some of these were far-reaching attacks from Dingane's Zulu regiments. But those that finally expelled them were a combination of Griqua, Rolong and Boers mounted on horseback and armed with guns. In 1838–40, the Ndebele withdrew north of the Limpopo, where they overcame the Shona Rozvi state, which was already weakened by earlier assaults from the Ngoni. There, Mzilikazi absorbed subject Shona and re-established his kingdom on much the same pattern as on the Sotho-Tswana highveld.

The British at the Cape

The British government seized control of the Cape Colony from the Dutch East India Company in 1795. Although they handed it over to the Dutch government in 1803, the British retook the colony in 1806 and this time they retained control. Like the Dutch before them, the British needed a supply station for their ships to India and a naval base from which to protect their shipping from attacks by rival Europeans. In their attempts to turn the Cape into a secure and profitable British colony, the British introduced a number of social and economic changes. The net result of these changes was to prompt a large number of rural Dutch-speaking colonists from the eastern Cape, known as 'Boers', to trek northwards out of the colony in the 1830s and 40s.

Economic expansion

At first, the early years of British rule seemed to offer a lot that favoured the interests of the Dutch-speaking population of the Cape Colony. The wine farmers of the western Cape now had freer access to British markets. The large British garrison at Cape Town and the increasing number of British ships calling at the port provided better markets for local wheat farmers and the pastoral trekboers of the interior. There was an expansion in the farming of Merino sheep, grown for their wool rather than just their meat, and trekboer hunters of the interior benefited from the rising British market for African ivory.

Labour

Although the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 created an initial shortage of labour, British proclamations soon tightened up controls over 'free' labour in the colony. According to the so-called 'Hottentot Code' of 1809, all Khoesan and 'free black' men in the colony had to carry 'passes' showing where they lived and who their employer was. Any without a pass could be contracted to the nearest white colonist who needed labour. The 'pass system' introduced here provided a model for similar laws throughout colonial Africa and apartheid South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the plus side for the workers, however, employers now had to issue their employees with written contracts. And the latter were allowed access to the courts, where they could challenge their 'masters' for breach of contract or assault. In 1812, a number of judges toured the rural districts of the colony to hear the large number of cases brought by servants against their employers. Although very few convictions were obtained, the circuit courts caused outrage among frontier Boers who had previously felt free to use and abuse their workers as and when they saw fit.

While these changes were taking place, a number of Christian missionaries arrived from Europe to work among the 'heathen native' population of the colony. Missionaries soon became champions of the poor and oppressed Khoesan of the Cape. They pursued their interests in the courts and encouraged them to develop independent peasant farming at the mission stations. This gave the Khoesan some degree of freedom – much to the annoyance of local Boer employers.

The activities and writings of the missionaries were a strong influence on the British government at the Cape. In 1828, the government issued Ordinance 50, which removed the restrictions of the Hottentot Code of 1809. This allowed Khoesan and 'coloured' (mixed race and freed slave) workers the basic right and freedom to move around the colony without a 'pass' and choose their own employer or become independent peasant farmers. Ordinance 50 and the abolition of slavery in 1834 were based on the belief that a free waged labour force was more contented and more efficient, in the long term, than a restricted or enslaved one. Both measures were resented by the Boers of the eastern frontier regions. The poorer Boers were unable to afford good enough wages to attract workers to their farms. Wealthier, slave-owning Boers complained of the poor compensation they were offered for their 'slaves'. The labour policies of the British at the Cape were thus a strong incentive for frontier Boers to consider emigrating northwards beyond the boundaries of the colony.

The eastern Cape frontier and the conflict with the Xhosa

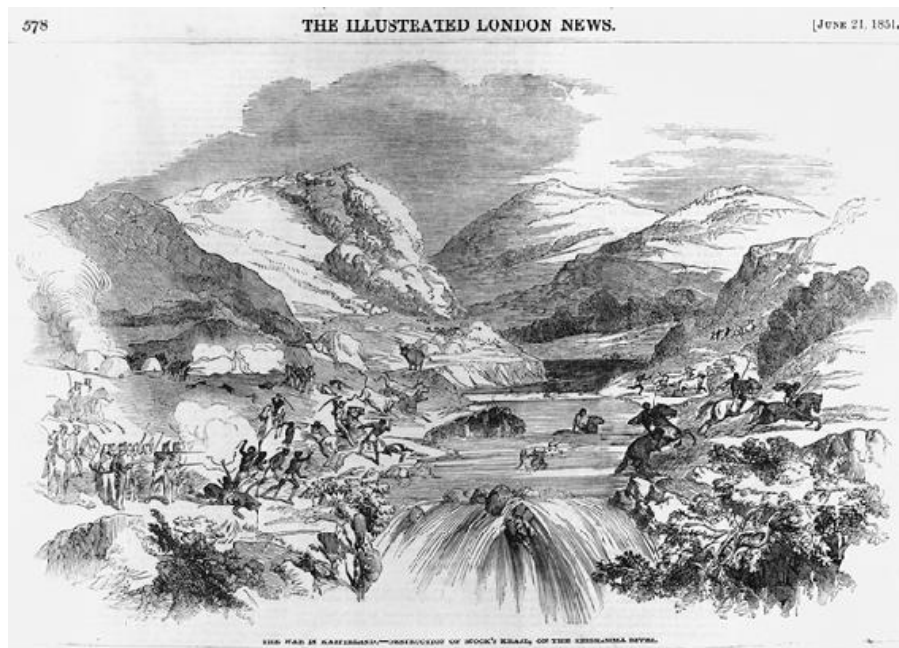
The most important innovation that the British brought to the eastern Cape frontier was the presence of a standing army at Cape Town, which could be quickly summoned to the frontier when the need arose. On the one hand, this brought the frontier trekboers under closer government control. But, ultimately, it strengthened the position of the white settlers in their continuing struggle with the Xhosa for possession of the Zuurveld.

The pattern of the first three Cape–Xhosa or Frontier Wars had been one of raid and counter-raid between two fairly evenly matched opponents (see [Chapter 15](#)). The Boers' weakness, offsetting their advantage of guns and horses, had been the temporary nature of their voluntary 'commandos'. In time of war, their attention and resources were torn between pursuing the enemy and protecting their own farms and families. The professional forces of the British army had no such problem. Local volunteers were still widely used, but they now had the back-up of the garrison at Cape Town, and, if necessary, reinforcements from overseas.

In their first conflict with the Xhosa, the British introduced the concept of total warfare, more akin to that of the northern Nguni, and totally alien to the Xhosa. In the 'Fourth War', of 1811–12, the British brutally cleared the Xhosa from the Zuurveld and expelled them east of the Great Fish River. In the overcrowded conditions that resulted, civil war soon erupted among the Xhosa east of the Fish. The British seized the opportunity and intervened in what became the 'Fifth War' (1818–19). Despite a daring Xhosa invasion of the Zuurveld, the British eventually pushed them even further back, beyond the Keiskamma River.

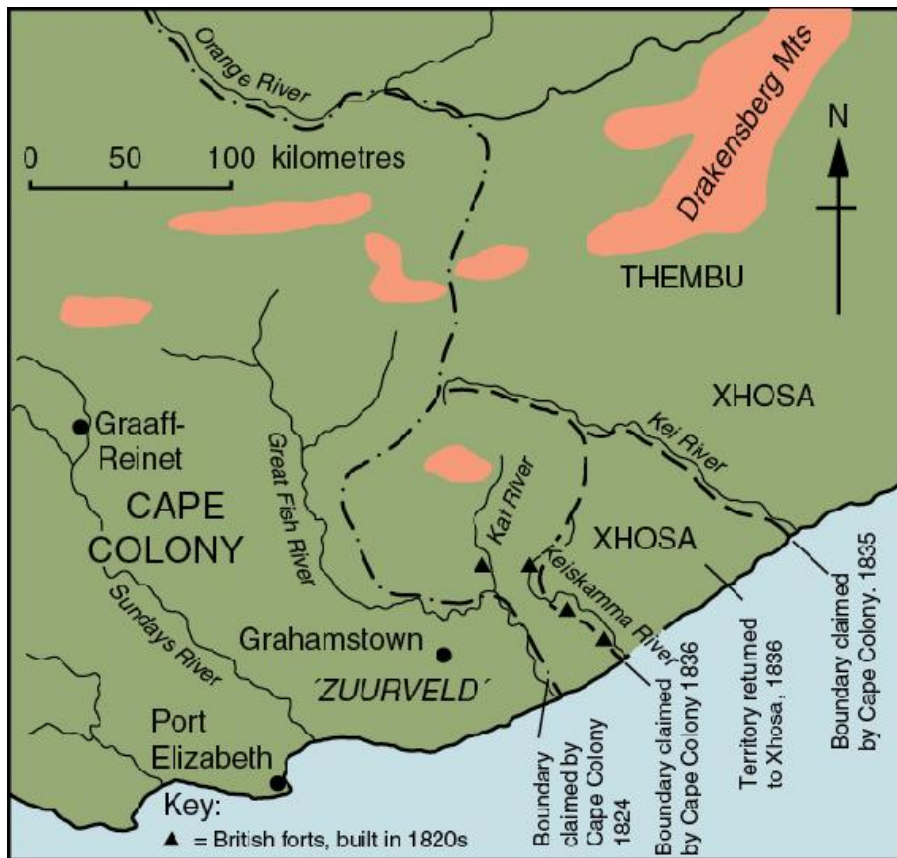
Determined to protect the colony from any future 'invasion', the British attempted to create a barrier of 'empty land' between the Great Fish River and the Keiskamma River and built a number of military forts to patrol the region. An attempt at a 'human barrier' was added to the northern part of the region when the British allowed a group of Khoesan and 'coloured' (mixed race) peasant farmers to settle in the Kat River valley. But the British then ruined this settlement's chances of economic success by using it as a dumping ground for unemployed 'coloureds' from the colony. Furthermore, the general land shortage in the region ensured that the 'empty land' policy did not last for long. Xhosa quickly returned to the region and clashes soon erupted between them and trekboer squatters who ignored British restrictions on the territory. In the resultant 'Sixth War' (1834–5), the British pushed even further east and annexed the rest of Xhosa territory west of the River Kei.

Figure 20.6 An incident in the Cape–Xhosa wars: the destruction of Stock's Kraal [settlement] on the Keiskamma River, during the Eighth Frontier War, 21 June 1851.



Source: Illustrated London News/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The Cape Colony and Xhosa resistance, 1811–36



As a result of this annexation, Boers of the eastern Cape looked forward to a whole new region being thrown open to white settlement. But the British government disappointed them by deciding that the security of the new province would be too expensive to maintain. To the disgust of frontier Boers and eager British land speculators, the territory between the Keiskamma and the Kei Rivers was handed back to the Xhosa in 1836 ([Map 20.2](#)). The ‘loss’ of this new province convinced many Boers to join the growing number of their compatriots who were packing up their belongings and trekking northwards from the colony.

The Boer Trek and African resistance

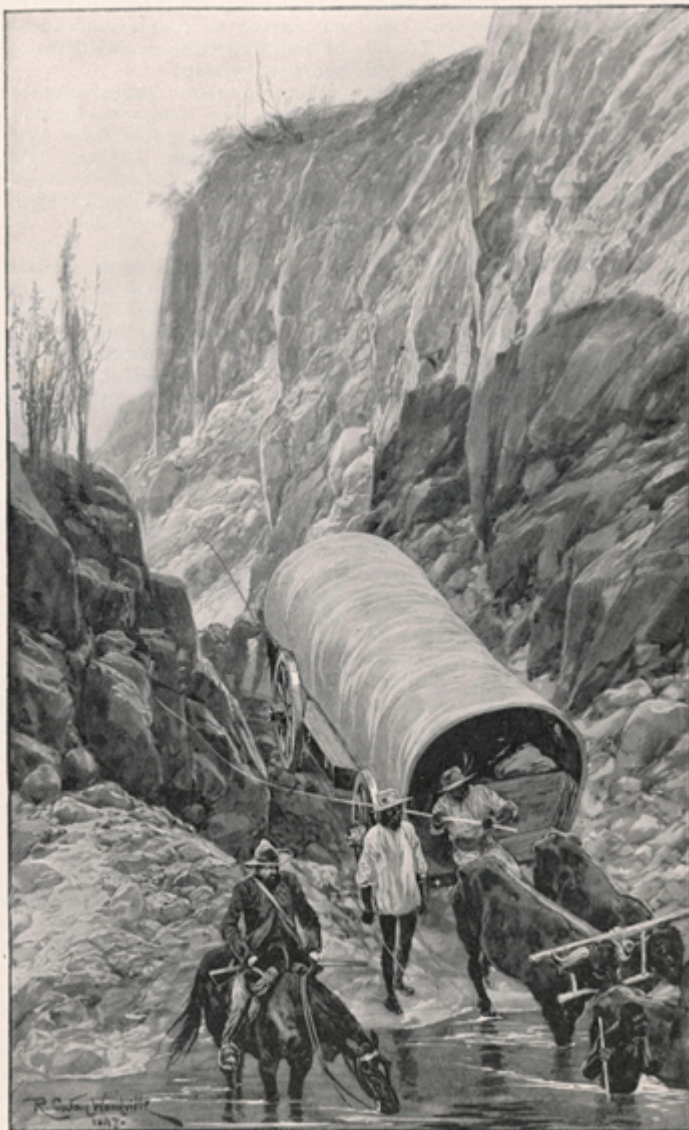
The Boer Trek

In the late 1830s, several thousand Boer families and their servants

trekked northwards from the eastern Cape, on to the southern highveld and away from the Cape Colony. Modern Afrikaner historians and nationalists have glorified this movement as ‘the Great Trek’ – the founding event in Afrikaner culture, the earliest expression of Afrikaner nationalism. The term ‘Afrikaner’ in reference to the people of European ancestry who spoke the South African dialect of Dutch (‘Afrikaans’) did not begin to come into regular use until the late nineteenth century. Even then, the British continued to insist on calling all rural Afrikaners ‘Boers’.

The ‘Great Trek’ was in fact a series of relatively small, separate treks, with poorer families grouped together under the protection and leadership of richer patriarchs. There was little overall unity of purpose and direction. Indeed, there was considerable rivalry among the various group leaders. This was reflected in the lack of unity and cooperation between the first generation of trekker republics that were founded on the highveld. The one issue on which they were united was their desire for freedom from British government control, combined with free access to vast stretches of new land. While they would have heard rumours of ‘empty land’ lying open for the taking, they were under no illusion that they were not likely to meet African resistance. Indeed, it was not in their interest to have no resident Africans upon whom they could call, forcibly if necessary, for labour and other services. But they had full confidence that God and the gun were on their side.

Figure 20.7 To escape British rule and secure ‘free’ land for themselves, Boer families emigrated northwards from the Cape Colony into what had hitherto been independent African territory. Here, they cross the Drakensberg to enter the southeastern lowveld where they came into conflict with the powerful kingdom of the Zulu. Painting by R. Caton Woodville in *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1897.



BOERS TREKKING—CROSSING THE DRAAKSBERG.

Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

Most of the 'Voortrekkers' (literally, 'front trekkers') of the 1830s and 40s came from the eastern Cape districts, where they had experienced a severe shortage of land. The Xhosa had effectively blocked the trekboer movement eastwards, and the British had shown an unwillingness or inability to extend the colony further than the Keiskamma. In addition, Xhosa invasions of the Zuurveld in 1819 and 1834 had emphasised the continuing insecurity of white settlement in the frontier districts. On top of this came the increasingly restrictive

policies of the British government. Rents were rigorously collected. The freedom of the old loan farm system was being replaced by a system of land tenure that led to the ownership of land as private property, which poorer Boers could not afford. Locally elected Boer officials were replaced by British-appointed magistrates from Cape Town. English was used in education and the law courts, and Boer employers found their traditionally violent treatment of their servants was being interfered with. The 'free labour' policy of Ordinance 50 and the abolition of slavery added greatly to Boer dissatisfaction, especially in the eastern frontier districts. The British failure to provide them with further Xhosa land east of the Keiskamma was the final straw for many.



For further coverage of the Great Trek, see 'The "Great Trek"' on the companion website, at
www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

The impact of the Boer invasion and African resistance

From an African viewpoint, the Boer Trek of the 1830s and 40s was, in effect, nothing short of an invasion. It extended permanent white settlement firmly into the interior of southern Africa. Many historical maps and some historians of South Africa have tended to assume this meant that within a few years, the Voortrekker 'republics' controlled the whole of the modern provinces of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. In fact, this was not the case. The direction of the treks and the positioning of the 'republics' were determined largely by patterns of African settlement and resistance.

The Voortrekkers aimed initially for the relatively underpopulated southern highveld in the region of the middle Vaal. At Thaba 'Nchu, they were befriended by the Rolong who welcomed them as useful allies (Map 20.3). This southern Tswana chiefdom hoped to use the Boers' military advantage of guns and horses against the Ndebele, who had recently expelled them from their traditional 'homeland' region around the upper Molopo basin. The Rolong thus joined with Boers and Griqua in attacking the Ndebele in 1837. As we saw above, the Ndebele were eventually driven into abandoning the region in order to regroup further north on the Zimbabwe plateau. The Boers then

claimed right of conquest to the former Ndebele Kingdom and established their main settlements north and south of the middle Vaal. Those Rolong and other Tswana who returned to their former territory found themselves subjected to frequent Boer demands for labour and taxation.

Further north and east, small groups of Voortrekkers established tiny 'republics' in the far northern Soutpansberg and at Ohrigstad and Lydenburg in the east. But these were largely hunting and trading bases, and the extent of effective Boer settlement was kept in check by the strength of Venda, Pedi and Swazi resistance. Indeed, the Venda eventually succeeded in expelling the Boers completely from the Soutpansberg in the 1860s. The Pedi by then were sending migrant workers to the Cape Colony to stockpile firearms for future conflict with the Boers.

Meanwhile, the most dramatic conflict had occurred in the southeastern lowveld. Access to this well-watered and fertile grassland had been a primary aim of many early Voortrekkers. They hoped to settle south of the Tugela. But first they had to come to terms with the powerful Zulu Kingdom.

Dingane, the Zulu king, used the traditional Zulu tactics of speed and ruthlessness to try to remove this new potential threat. Having at first allayed Boer suspicions by apparently agreeing to come to terms, Dingane suddenly unleashed his Zulu regiments. Most of the early southeastern trekkers were wiped out in the early months of 1838. By the end of the year, however, the Boers had regrouped and in a decisive battle they proved the superiority of their weaponry. Protected behind a tight circle of wagons (known as a *laager*), the guns of 500 Boers successfully beat off the massed attacks of the cream of the Zulu army. The Ncome River was said to have run red with the blood of the 3,000 Zulu killed, hence the name, the Battle of Blood River. However, even after this dramatic victory, the Boers dared not occupy the densely populated region of the Zulu heartland. Their 'republic of Natalia' was founded to the south of the Tugela. But the Battle of Blood River of 16 December 1838 was to enter Boer mythology as a gift from God, who granted a small band of dedicated white men victory over the mightiest African army of its day. Celebration of this day would later feed into Afrikaner nationalist mythology in the apartheid era as a white minority attempted to stem the tide of majority rule in the second half of the twentieth century.

Figure 20.8 Utimuni, nephew of Shaka the late Zulu king, in ceremonial battledress. Plate 13 from *The Kafirs Illustrated*, 1849.



Source: Historical Picture Archive/Contributor.

Further expansion of Boer settlement on the highveld continued at the expense of their neighbours, in some regions with more difficulty than in others. In the southeastern highveld of the Caledon River valley, they were fiercely resisted by Moshoeshoe's powerful Sotho kingdom. During the 1840s, the Sotho had strengthened their position by buying in guns and horses from the Cape Colony. They became expert horsemen and the 'Basuto pony' became a characteristic breed

of southern Africa. Full use was made of the mountainous terrain and some Sotho defensive positions were virtually impregnable. Nevertheless, in a series of wars in the 1850s and 60s, the Boers of the 'Orange Free State' gradually occupied the lowlands and reduced the size of the Sotho kingdom. In 1868, Moshoeshoe was driven to ask for British annexation. This saved the remnants of the Sotho kingdom from complete annihilation. But the most productive and valuable part of the kingdom had already been lost to Boer conquest.

Southern Africa in 1870

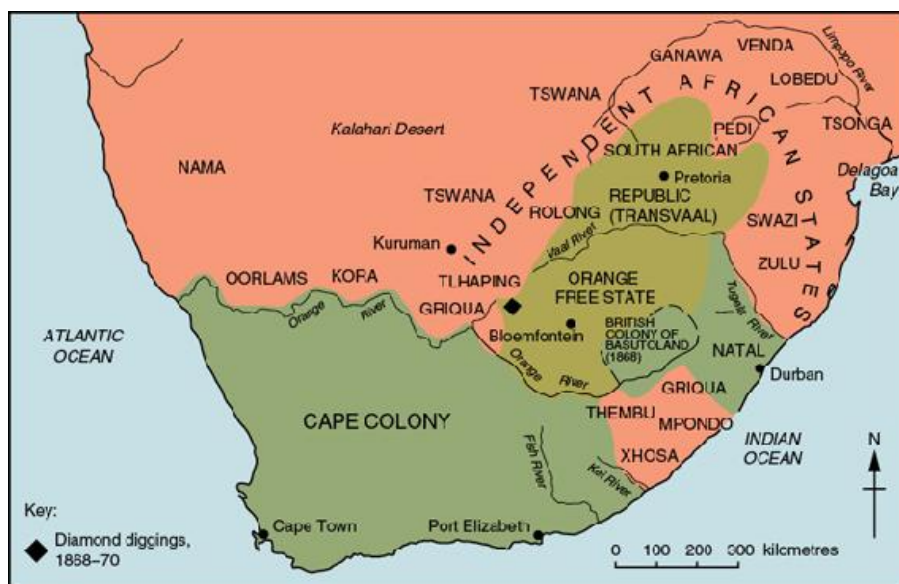
After further wars in the eastern Cape in the 1840s and 50s, colonial authority had been extended as far as the River Kei ([Map 20.4](#)). Xhosa resistance had shown the futility of simply expelling Africans from their land, and 'reserves' were set aside for African occupation in the eastern Cape. Much of the best land, however, was sold to white colonists who used it for grazing Merino sheep. The 'reserves' were inadequate for the subsistence of the western Xhosa and many families began to depend on meagre wages earned on white-owned farms. In Natal, where the African population of 250,000 outnumbered that of whites by nearly 15 to 1, Africans were 'reserved' a mere 15 per cent of the land. In Natal, however, most of the white landowners were absentee. In practice, this allowed Africans to occupy much of the land as peasant farmers, paying rent or a share of their crops to the official white 'owners'. Within the Boer republics of the highveld, Africans living on white-owned farms were allowed to keep a few animals and grow their own crops, but in return they were expected to provide unpaid labour services to the Boer landholders.

The majority of the people in the southern African interior, black or white, in republics, colonies or kingdoms, were still, by 1870, largely dependent on a self-sufficient mixture of pastoralism and small-scale crop cultivation. The products of hunting – skins, ivory and ostrich feathers – were their main export commodities. These were exchanged for guns, ammunition and manufactured luxuries. British merchants at the coastal ports of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban made large fortunes out of what was known as 'the interior trade'.

By 1870, a certain political balance had been achieved between black and white in southern Africa. The rapid white expansion of the early years of the Boer Trek had ended. White settlement had become firmly established in the areas most weakened by the wars of the so-

called *mfecane/difaqane*, but elsewhere African kingdoms had recovered and emerged militarily stronger than before. They were now importing guns from the Cape Colony and Natal and would be better able to defend themselves against future white challenge. Any further large-scale extension of white settlement in the interior would require the kind of military resources only a major European power such as Britain could provide. But so long as the hunting trade, furnished primarily by willing African hunters, remained the interior's principal export, the British had no particular incentive to intervene.

Southern Africa in 1870



All that was about to change with the discovery of huge deposits of valuable minerals in the southern African interior – diamonds just north of the Orange River in the 1870s and gold in the heart of the Boer republic of the Transvaal in the 1880s. The impact of these discoveries transformed the course of southern African history, as will be discussed in [Chapter 23](#).



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CHAPTER 21

North and northeast Africa in the nineteenth century

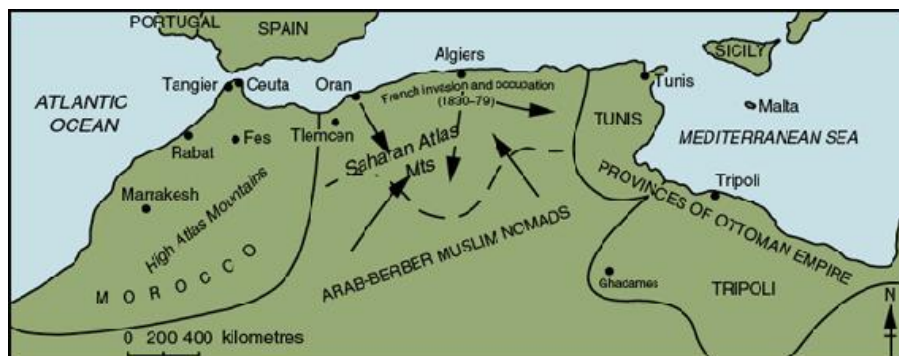
The French in north Africa and Algerian resistance

The whole of the north African coastal region, apart from the western kingdom of Morocco, was still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century. But the Turkish regents of the north African provinces ruled their territories with no direct reference to the sultan at Istanbul. Even within the territories themselves, regency authority did not extend far beyond a narrow coastal fringe. Algeria was typical in this respect. Here, the ruler, the *dey*, was drawn from the ranks of the Turkish officers of the coastal and garrison towns. Beyond the towns, the Arab and Berber clans remained virtually independent, especially in the mountains. The *dey* periodically intervened in disputes between rival clans, but otherwise had little effective influence in the rural areas. Nominal Ottoman rule in Algeria was ended by the French in 1830 when they occupied the coastal towns of Algiers and Oran and sent the *dey* into exile.

The French invasion of Algeria

Relations between France and the rulers of Algeria had been strained for some time. Algeria had been exporting grain and olive oil to France since the eighteenth century. In 1798, the Algerian *dey* supplied grain to the French army for Napoleon's invasion of Egypt – an indication of the degree of independence exercised by these supposed provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Subsequent French governments, however, refused to pay the debt for the grain. Disputes over this and other matters led to a break in diplomatic relations between France and Algeria in 1827.

Algeria and the Maghrib, 1800–80



The official excuse for the French invasion in 1830 was to bring an end to the piracy of the corsairs of Algiers (see [Chapter 13](#)). In fact, corsair piracy, rife in earlier centuries, was no longer a serious threat to powerfully protected European shipping in the Mediterranean. In reality, the French invasion and occupation of Algiers was an attempt to raise nationalistic fervour at home to boost support for a corrupt and unpopular French monarchy. Subsequent French governments viewed the territory as a potentially wealthy colony for white settlement and as a market for the products of French factories. From the beginning, however, the French faced the formidable opposition of the Arab-Berber Muslims of the interior.

'Abd al-Qadir and Algerian resistance

The French invasion of Algeria prompted one of the continent's hardest fought and most protracted wars of African resistance against nineteenth-century European colonial conquest. The nomadic and semi-nomadic clans and Muslim brotherhoods of the Algerian interior were notorious for their rivalry and the frequent raids and warfare between themselves. But at least they had the pattern of their economic life, their Arabic language and their Islamic religion and cultural values in common. Thus, there always existed the seeds of an underlying unity that might emerge when faced with an outside threat to their whole way of life. The French invasion of 1830 was just such a threat. Alien rulers had exercised their power from the coastal towns for centuries, but the Turks were at least Muslim and their rule, which was pretty lax, was to some extent informed by Islamic law and practices. The French, on the other hand, threatened not only

conquest and foreign rule, but also the imposition of a completely alien religion, culture and legal system. Resistance to the French, therefore, quickly took the form of a jihad or holy war against the infidel (the ‘unbeliever’), and as such, the struggle continued for almost fifty years.

Early Algerian resistance was organised and led by ‘Abd al-Qadir (the title ‘al-Qadir’ means ‘the Great’ in Arabic), a gifted and energetic young *marabout* (‘holy man’) from western Algeria. Like his jihadist contemporaries south of the Sahara, ‘Abd al-Qadir (1808–83) used the stimulus of the jihad to unite the Arab-Berber clans and Muslim brotherhoods of Algeria into a single, powerful Islamic state. He overcame local rivalries by dividing the country into a number of administrative districts and holding each district chief responsible for his own defence. Administrative headquarters were heavily fortified and were used as bases for raiding French columns and towns. Although guns were imported from Europe, many were also made and repaired by the Algerians themselves. Much of the central authority of the state was exercised by ‘Abd al-Qadir himself (Figure 21.1). As ‘Commander of the Faithful’, he regularly toured the administrative districts, coordinating military operations and dispensing justice according to the strict laws of the Qur’an.

In the end, the French prevailed, but only at the cost of tens of thousands of French lives and possibly hundreds of thousands of Algerian ones. The massive French army of occupation numbered more than 100,000 by the end of the 1840s. They used scorched-earth tactics, destroying animals and crops and massacring villagers. They exploited local rivalries and promised support to those who resented the authority of ‘Abd al-Qadir. Al-Qadir himself was finally captured and exiled in 1847. But the strength of the movement he had founded was shown in the continuance of resistance long after his removal. The mountainous region of Kabylie was not occupied by the French until 1857 and was disrupted by rebellion for most of the 1870s. It was 1879 before the French could finally consider that they had battered the Algerians into submission. But they never conquered the sullen resentment their occupation engendered.

Figure 21.1 ‘Abd al-Qadir, who led Algerian resistance to the French in the 1830s and 40s, uniting the people in what was in effect an alternative Algerian state, until his capture by the French in 1847.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The French occupation

In the wake of French conquest came white settlers, not only from France but also from Spain and the poor rural districts of the Mediterranean islands. As Arab-Berber farmers and pastoralists were cleared from their land, the white settlers moved in, taking over olive plantations and vineyards along the coastal hillsides and wheat farms

in the plains around the towns. When the military government had no more land to give out, the European immigrants bought further land for a pittance from impoverished peasant farmers. In 1871, the European colonists in Algeria, known as *colons*, numbered 130,000; by the end of the century, they had reached a million, 13 per cent of the total population. By the closing decades of the century, most of the cultivable land in the country was in the hands of European landowners, the majority of whom were absentees, living in the towns. The land itself was worked by the dispossessed Arab-Berber peasantry, who were poorly paid and overtaxed. Muslim Algerians were brought under strict control and their freedom of movement was restricted, much in the manner of the Khoesan of the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century (see [Chapter 20](#)). To add to the humiliation of conquest, Islamic law was overridden by French law. In their own country, Muslim Algerians were regarded by the French *colon* government as alien and inferior. The arrogance of French administrators added insult to injury.

Figure 21.2 Tuareg man working in his vegetable garden in the Djanet oasis, Algerian Sahara.



Source: Frans Lemmens/Alamy Stock Photo.

Egypt and Sudan

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt

In late June 1798, a 25,000-strong French army landed on Egypt's Mediterranean coast and seized Alexandria. At the time, Egypt was

loosely controlled by two Mamluk *bey*s, Ibrahim and Murad. Their power was based on the loyalty of local *bey*s: Ibrahim Bey commanded Cairo and the Delta and Murad Bey most of Upper Egypt.

Underlying French designs on Egypt was an old Anglo-French rivalry that stemmed back to at least the Seven Years War (1756–63). Although Britain had subsequently lost the American War of Independence (1776–83), she still had Canada, many Caribbean colonies and, above all, India. France, on the other hand, had lost out to Britain in both India and North America in the Seven Years War and, in the 1790s, was in the process of losing her most profitable Caribbean sugar colony to the slave revolt in Haiti. It was under these circumstances that French attention turned to Egypt. The French already had trading interests in Egypt, through which they received grain and cotton, but by the 1790s they were suffering competition from British traders. French colonisation of Egypt would secure them a reliable source of cotton and grain as well as potentially provide sugar plantations to replace those lost in the Caribbean.

The colonising expedition was led by the young, impetuous French general Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon's ambition far outstripped the designs of the French government in Paris. He modelled himself on Alexander ('the Great') of Macedon, who had conquered Egypt and led his armies through western Asia as far as the valley of the Indus. Napoleon aimed to create a similar 'Empire of the Orient', with himself as its leader. He even saw it as potentially like an 'America of the East', ultimately gaining its independence from France. In order to create his eastern empire of French civilisation, Napoleon took with him 200 civilians from among the best intellectuals in France – scientists, mathematicians, geographers, artists and linguists. He called them his 'savants'.

On 21 July 1798, the French fought the main Egyptian army north of Cairo in what Napoleon, seeing himself as a successor to the pharaohs, pretentiously called 'The Battle of the Pyramids'. Napoleon's army was substantially outnumbered, but the courageous charges of the cream of the Mamluk cavalry were no match for the tightly disciplined French infantry squares. By the end of the day, the Egyptian army had been put to flight, with the loss of many thousands of men, including up to 2,000 of the Mamluk's élite cavalry, against French losses of barely 150 casualties. Murad Bey retreated into Upper Egypt from where the Mamluks conducted regular attacks against the French occupying forces. Ibrahim Bey withdrew into Syria (the contemporary name for the whole of the territory between Turkey and Sinai).

Days after the French victory outside Cairo, the British navy

annihilated the French fleet as it lay at anchor in a bay to the east of Alexandria. The British pretentiously called it ‘The Battle of the Nile’. Cut off from supplies and reinforcements, Napoleon’s attempt to extend his conquests into Ottoman Syria were defeated. The following year he abandoned his army in Egypt and made his way back overland to Paris to seize power in the French capital. In 1801, an Ottoman army, with British naval support, forced the remnants of the French army out of Egypt.

The three-year French occupation of Egypt is important for a number of reasons. First, in his brief year in Egypt, Napoleon undermined Mamluk feudal power and began laying the foundations of a modern civil state, which would be taken up by his successor, as we shall see below. Second, the French invasion marked the beginnings of an Anglo-French rivalry in Egypt that was to dominate much of that country’s history in the century that followed. Indeed, it prefigured the late nineteenth-century European ‘Scramble for Africa’ that was largely led by France and Britain. Finally, in meticulously recording Ancient Egyptian religious and artistic work, as well as finding the Rosetta Stone (see Figure 5.1), Napoleon’s ‘savants’ laid the foundations of modern Egyptology.

Egypt under Muhammad Ali, 1805–49

Out of the chaos that followed the French evacuation of Egypt in 1801, a remarkable man named Muhammad Ali (1769–1849) rose to power in Egypt. He dragged the Egyptian state out of the sands of weakness and corruption into which it had sunk during the eighteenth century. Within a mere 20 years, Muhammad Ali transformed Egypt into the most powerful province of the Ottoman Empire, able to challenge the authority of the sultan himself.

Muhammad Ali (Figure 21.3) came from the Ottoman province of Albania, northeast of modern Greece. He arrived in Egypt with an Albanian contingent as part of the Ottoman army that forced the French out of Egypt in 1801. With the backing of his Albanian troops, Muhammad Ali soon made himself the master of Cairo, and in 1805, the Ottoman sultan recognised him as *pasha* (viceroy) of Egypt.

Muhammad Ali’s initial aim, like that of so many of the alien rulers of Egypt before him, was to found his own dynasty. He wanted the *pashalic* (jurisdiction of a pasha) of Egypt as a hereditary position for himself and his family after him. He sought to make Egypt the richest and most powerful state in all of northern Africa, independent in all but name from the Ottoman Empire, and secure from all internal or

external enemies. Muhammad Ali recognised that, in order to achieve these aims, he needed to implement some drastic reforms. In particular, in the wake of the French evacuation, he needed to prevent the Mamluks from re-establishing their corrupt tax farming system (see [Chapter 13](#)).

Figure 21.3 Muhammad Ali, an Albanian army commander who was part of the Ottoman army that expelled the French from Egypt in 1801. He made himself master of Cairo and in 1805 was recognised as Ottoman pasha of Egypt. He is regarded by many Egyptians as ‘the founder of modern Egypt’. He ruled until his death in 1849, by which time he had pressurised the Ottoman sultan into granting him and his heirs the hereditary pashalic of Egypt.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

In implementing his reforms, Muhammad Ali favoured European advice and technology. He developed a salaried civil service and a modern professional army, both modelled on European rather than African or Asian lines. Because of these leanings, European historians have often praised him as a ‘moderniser’ and, indeed, many Egyptians themselves view him as ‘the founder of modern Egypt’. It is important to remember, however, that for all his reforms and modernisation, Muhammad Ali was not motivated by any desire to better the lot of the Egyptian people as a whole. The Egyptian population in the 1820s was 2.5 million, 90 per cent of whom were *fellahin* (peasants), despised by Muhammad Ali as ‘barbarians’. The Egyptian *fellahin* had always been grossly exploited, especially during periods of Egyptian

‘greatness’. But even by these standards, during Muhammad Ali’s reign they suffered particularly harshly. On top of their usual taxation and forced labour, they were conscripted into the army. When the *fellahin* responded with a series of revolts in the 1820s, these were brutally suppressed.

The basis of Muhammad Ali’s power was the army: first the Albanians who brought him to power, then Sudanese slaves and finally conscripted Egyptian *fellahin*. For centuries, the Egyptian army had consisted of irregular feudal levies, raised and controlled by Mamluk *beys* (commanders) in return for vast estates (tax farms, or *iqta*) from which they extracted revenue. The system had been open to corruption and abuse as *iqta* became hereditary and the Egyptian central government lost control of both the army and the country’s tax. In its place, Muhammad Ali built a professional salaried army, organised into specialised regiments of cavalry, artillery and infantry, disciplined and drilled by imported Turkish and European officers. He disposed of his principal opponents, the Mamluks, with characteristic ruthlessness. In 1811, he organised the massacre of several hundred Mamluk *beys*, and the remainder fled the country to take refuge at Dongola, south of the Egyptian frontier in what was to become known as Sudan.

The expansion of the Egyptian empire, 1805–80



Muhammad Ali took over for himself the estates of the Mamluks. He abolished the tax farming system, so that taxes were now paid directly to the state. He introduced a new land survey, the first for several centuries, so that taxes could be reassessed and more efficiently collected. He developed a reformed and salaried civil service answerable only to central government. At the same time, he introduced agricultural reforms. As with so many of his predecessors, reform of agriculture in Egypt was motivated by a desire to raise greater revenue for the state. In Muhammad Ali's time, irrigation was

extended, the work being done by the traditional forced labour of the *fellahin*. More land was brought under cultivation and long fibre cotton, imported from Sudan, soon became a major Egyptian cash crop. Taxes were paid in kind, mostly wheat and cotton, and these were exported to Europe, earning a substantial profit for the state.

The Egyptian invasion and occupation of Sudan from the 1820s will be considered shortly. It is sufficient to note here that it was initially prompted mainly by a desire to increase the supply of Sudanese slaves for the Egyptian army. Muhammad Ali's reign saw a revival of trade through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, which had suffered since the opening of the south Atlantic route. Muhammad Ali's forces reasserted Ottoman power in the Red Sea and defeated the Wahhabi Arab clans of central Arabia who had occupied the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This reopened the holy places to international Muslim pilgrimage, to the benefit of the merchants of Cairo who, as in earlier times, did brisk business with the pilgrims. Muhammad Ali reached the height of his personal ambition in 1841 when the Ottoman sultan recognised the *pashalic* of Egypt as a hereditary position within Muhammad Ali's family.

The growth of European power and influence in Egypt, up to 1882

There was increasing European interest in Egypt during the reign of Muhammad Ali and his immediate successors. European advisers, army officers and bureaucrats were all employed in the effort to 'modernise'. European merchants began to operate in the country from 1838, after their governments had put pressure on Muhammad Ali to drop his restrictions on foreign traders. French and British merchants were particularly interested in expanding the ivory trade from Sudan. Britain began to use Egypt as an overland route to the Red Sea, a shorter and alternative route to her colonial territories in India. There followed heavy British investment in railway construction in the 1850s connecting the Mediterranean port of Alexandria to Cairo and the Red Sea port of Suez. In 1859, French engineers began work on a canal linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea at Suez ([Figure 21.4](#)).

Muhammad Ali was succeeded by two short reigns, during which French and British influence increased still further. In 1863, Muhammad Ali's grandson, Isma'il, succeeded to the *pashalic* and shortly afterwards upgraded his title to that of *khedive* (an ancient Persian title meaning 'king'). It was a boom time for the state's finances, as Egyptian cotton exports benefited from the shortage of

American cotton caused by civil war in the United States (1861–5). On the strength of this boom, Isma'il invested heavily in extending the railway up the Nile and in updating his army to expand the Egyptian empire further into Sudan. But with the decline that followed the cotton boom of the 1860s, Egypt's vast indebtedness to Europeans began to tell. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, more and more of Egypt's trade was dominated by European shipping (see [Figure 21.5](#)). The canal had been jointly financed by France and Egypt, with the Egyptian government paying three-quarters of the £19 million costs. As Egypt's finances became overstretched in the 1870s, Britain seized the opportunity to buy the Egyptian share of the canal in 1875 for a mere £4 million, a fraction of its true worth. With this action, Britain safeguarded its route to India and at the same time became deeply committed to the security of its investments in Egypt.

Figure 21.4 Construction of the Suez Canal. Before work on the canal could begin, the Egyptian government excavated and reflooded a 3,000-year-old canal from the time of the Pharaohs, linking the Nile to the Red Sea, in order to provide fresh water for the workers.



Source: General Photographic Agency/Getty Images.

In 1876, Isma'il was forced to admit that his country was bankrupt, unable to pay its foreign debts. In order to safeguard their heavy financial involvement in Egypt, the French and the British forced the deposition of Isma'il in 1879 and the installation of his son Tawfiq as

a puppet *khedive*. In an action that prefigured late twentieth-century World Bank and IMF policies in Africa, Britain and France formally established ‘dual control’ over Egypt’s finances in order to ensure the payment of Egypt’s debts to European banks.

Urabi Pasha, Egyptian nationalism and British invasion

Anglo-French ‘dual control’ aroused the passion of Egyptian nationalists, who had resented the Turko-Albanian ruling clique almost as much as they opposed this new European interference. Led by the son of an indigenous Egyptian *fellah* (peasant), Colonel Ahmad Urabi (also known as Urabi Pasha), the nationalists and their supporters in the army pressured Tawfiq into appointing two of them to key government posts. Thus, in 1881, Urabi became minister for war and Mahmud al-Barudi became prime minister. Urabi’s ‘National Party’ gained wide popularity under the slogan ‘Egypt for the Egyptians’.

Interviewed by a British journalist at the time, Urabi declared his desire to establish some form of independent and accountable democratic government. The British and French pre-empted this by sending a naval force to blockade Alexandria in May 1882. The year before, the French had blockaded Tunis as a preliminary to the occupation of Tunisia. Urabi responded by strengthening the defences of Alexandria. Tension mounted in the city between Europeans and Egyptians and in June, anti-imperial riots left 50 Europeans dead. This provided the British with the excuse to commence a naval bombardment of the city, focusing in particular on destroying Urabi’s reinforcements.

Figure 21.5 Crowds watch a procession of ships on the Suez Canal, c.1874.



Source: Henry Guttmann/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The French, busy quelling resistance in Tunisia, withdrew their ships from the blockade, leaving the British free to land a naval force and occupy Alexandria. Urabi withdrew his forces to defend Cairo. Four weeks later, a large British army invaded Egypt from the Suez Canal. Approaching Cairo along the fresh-water canal, they defeated Urabi's army at the Battle of Tel el-Kebir and occupied the country. Urabi was captured and exiled to British-ruled Ceylon, today's Sri Lanka.

Britain had occupied Egypt for a complex variety of reasons, the most important of which were to protect the Suez Canal route to India (an aim of British Mediterranean policy since before the canal was even built), to protect present and future British financial investments in Egypt, and to quash at birth any anti-imperial Egyptian nationalism as evidenced by Urabi Pasha. Although in theory Britain now ruled the country in the name of their appointed *pasha*, Egypt had, in practice, become a British colony.

A genuine attempt to establish an independent, modern nationalist Egyptian state had been deliberately thwarted in an action that some historians regard as the first act in the notorious European 'Scramble for Africa'. Certainly, to the extent that inter-European rivalry fuelled the 'scramble', the French greatly resented the permanence of Britain's unilateral action of 1882 and Egypt became a thorn in the flesh of their imperial rivalry in the decades to come.

Egypt in Sudan, 1820–81

The principal aims of Muhammad Ali's invasion of Sudan were to crush the Mamluk stronghold of Dongola and to obtain Sudanese slaves to reinforce the Egyptian army. The invading force of 1820–1 consisted of only 4,000 men but it was heavily armed with imported European guns and artillery. They occupied Dongola and scattered the remaining Mamluks. The Funj sultanate had been disintegrating for some years, and offered little effective resistance. The Egyptians took the Funj capital, Sennar, without much difficulty and founded Khartoum as an administrative capital at the junction of the two Niles. During the 1820s, Egyptian control was extended over Kordofan to the southwest of Khartoum.

Egyptian forces raided for slaves to east and west, and particularly into the Nuba Mountains to the south of Kordofan. Hopes of rediscovering the Nubian gold mines that had fed the coffers of Ancient Egypt were quickly disappointed, but ivory soon provided an alternative source of wealth. In the early 1840s, the Egyptians finally overcame fierce Shilluk resistance on the upper Nile and thus gained access to the rich elephant hunting region of southern Sudan. The European, Egyptian and Sudanese merchants based in Khartoum, however, found it more profitable to raid than to trade and the Egyptian government placed no restrictions on their activities on the upper Nile. So, the private armies of these mostly alien merchants literally plundered the southern Sudanese in their search for ivory and, to a lesser extent, for slaves.

In the 1860s and 70s, Khedive Isma'il made further efforts to extend the Egyptian empire in the south. Garrisons were built among the Shilluk and Dinka of the upper Nile. European administrators Samuel Baker and Charles Gordon were employed in the 1870s in an unsuccessful attempt to bring the lakeland kingdoms of Bunyoro and Buganda under Egyptian control. Darfur was conquered in 1874. All this military activity provoked great hostility among the Sudanese and added considerably to Egypt's crippling foreign debt.

In 1881, a Muslim holy man from Dongola, Muhammad Ahmad, declared that he was the Mahdi, 'the Guided One' the saviour who would restore Muslim purity to the faithful of Islam. His call for a jihad prompted an enthusiastic response in Sudan. Attempts by Gordon to suppress the slave trade in the 1870s had been strongly resented by Muslim traders who had, for generations, profited from the traffic. The cattle-owning nomads of Kordofan hoped to throw off the heavy burden of taxation imposed on them by the bankrupt Egyptian administration. The holy men of the Sudanese Muslim

brotherhoods were scandalised by the corruption and lack of Islamic observance among the Turkish and Egyptian administrators. The increasing use of European Christians in the administration merely emphasised the alien, sacrilegious quality of the Egyptian presence in Sudan.

The Mahdist state of Sudan

The bravery and fervour of the Mahdist forces won them some impressive early victories over the better armed, 'modern' Egyptian armies sent against them. In 1885, they took Khartoum, killing Gordon and the remnants of the Egyptian soldiers and officials in the city. Five months later Muhammad Ahmad died, to the consternation of his most fervent supporters who believed the Mahdi was immortal. For a while the unity of the Mahdist movement lay in the balance, but the situation was saved by the determined rule of his successor, Khalifa 'Abdallahi. He set up a strong administrative system of appointed district governors, responsible for collecting taxation in strict accordance with the rule of the Qur'an. This was paid fairly willingly as it was far less arduous than the demands of former Egyptian tax collectors. The administration of the Mahdist state covered most of the region of the modern republic of Sudan. Communications were maintained over this vast area by a regular system of camel-mounted couriers. Unfortunately, most of the energies and revenue of the state were spent on wars with its neighbours: Ethiopia to the southeast and British-controlled Egypt in the north.

Mahdist Sudan, 1885–98



The Mahdist state was finally destroyed by a huge Anglo-Egyptian army sent against it in 1898. At the Battle of Omdurman, 11,000 Sudanese were slaughtered by British and Egyptian machine guns and artillery at the cost of merely 48 killed in the Anglo-Egyptian army. The Mahdist state of Sudan became an Anglo-Egyptian co-dominion – in effect, a British colony. The remote western sultanate of Darfur, however, which had only ever been loosely attached to the Mahdist state, was not included in this British conquest. Indeed, it remained, for the time being, one of the few African states to survive – through

neglect – the ‘Scramble for Africa’ of 1880–1910.

The reunification of Ethiopia

Ever since the eighteenth century, the emperor residing at Gondar had been little more than nominal head of the Ethiopian Empire. The very title ‘king of kings’ indicated that the emperor was ruler over many separate ‘kings’ and in this, the ‘era of the princes’, the provincial rulers of this ‘federation’ asserted their independence. In the northern and western borderlands, it was left to the local nobility to defend their territory from persistent Egyptian raids.

The power of the nobility and the position of the peasantry are indicated in a revealing observation by the British consul to Ethiopia in 1854:

The prosperous or adverse condition of a village depends almost entirely upon the rapacity or moderation of its immediate chief ... They pay a certain portion in kind to the Ras, or other great chief, and sometimes a regular tax in money; besides this they must furnish oxen to plough the King’s lands: their immediate governor then takes his share in kind of every grain – say a fifth, and feeds besides a certain number of soldiers at the expense of each householder; he has rights to oxen, sheep, and goats, butter, honey ... and can demand from them contributions on fifty pretexts.¹

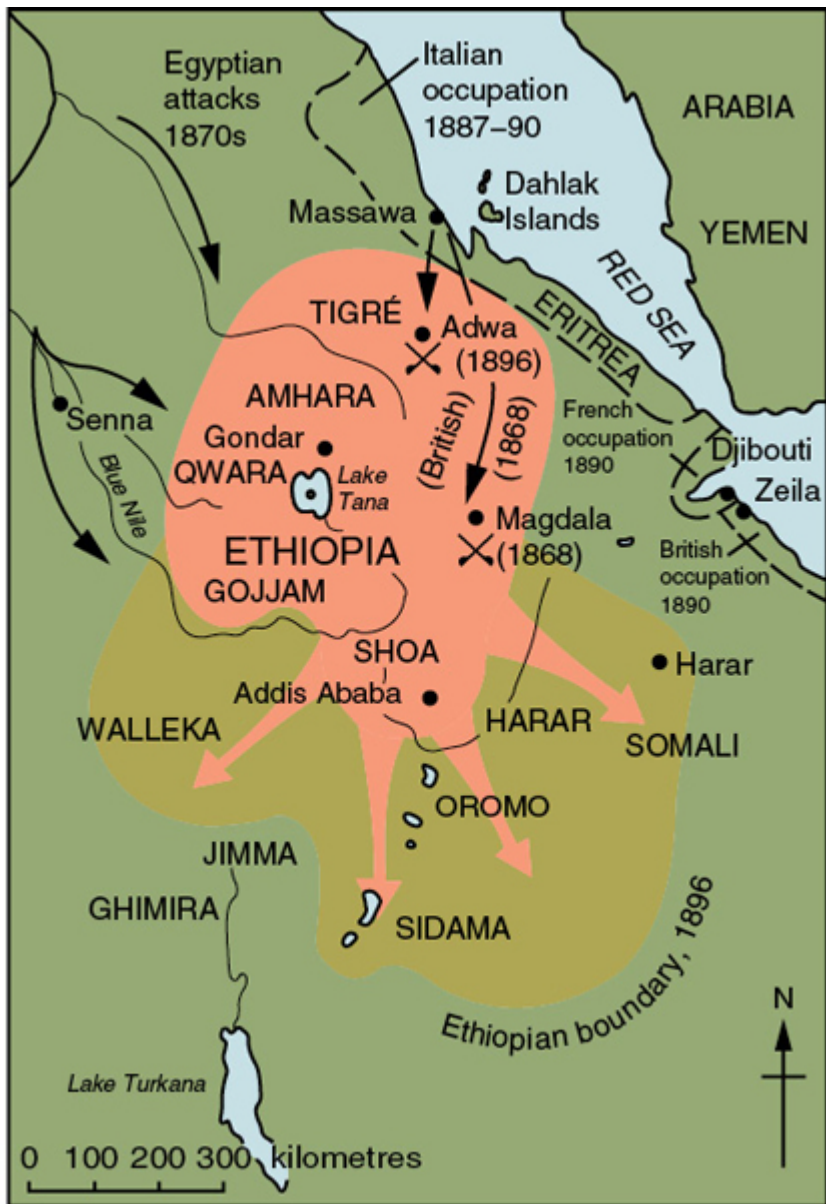
The reign of Tewodros II

In the early 1850s, Lij Kassa Haylu, the governor of the western province of Qwara, learnt from the experience of his clashes with the Egyptians. He reformed his army of irregular feudal levies into a trained and disciplined regular fighting force, equipped with firearms and artillery. In 1855, Kassa invaded the central provinces and seized the imperial throne for himself. He took the title Emperor Tewodros (Theodore) II. Although the 13-year reign of Tewodros was to end in disaster and suicide, it was nevertheless crucially important for the future survival of Ethiopia as an independent state. It was Tewodros who revived the concept of effective centralised government. His reforms brought him the hostility of Church and nobility alike. But in trying to establish these reforms, Tewodros laid the foundations for unity and revealed the nature of the problems to be faced by his successors.

Tewodros attempted to cut the independent power of the regional nobility by appointing district governors and judges, who were paid a salary by central government. In the past, these positions had been in the hands of the local hereditary nobility, who supported themselves from the labour of their peasantry. At the same time, Tewodros eased his dependence on the irregular feudal levies of the powerful nobility. He expanded his own regular military force into a national army, drilled, disciplined and salaried, and trained in the use of modern firearms and artillery. Between 1855 and 1861, there were a number of regional rebellions as the local nobility tried to reassert their independence. Hostility towards the emperor was raised still further when Tewodros, in attempting to suppress these rebellions, allowed his soldiers to loot and massacre and mutilate their captives.

Tewodros might have survived these problems had he retained the support of the Church. But in attempting to abolish the grosser privileges of the clergy, he confiscated many of the huge Church estates, leaving each parish with just enough land to support a minimum handful of clergy. Tewodros's loss of Church support lost him the legitimacy of his imperial title. It was largely Church influence that persuaded a majority of Ethiopians to desert their emperor in his time of greatest need.

The crisis came in 1868. In a minor diplomatic dispute with British consular officials, Tewodros arrested the local British consul. The British, anxious to assert their position as a major world power, sent a huge British army of 30,000 men to rescue the consular 'hostages'. As the British army penetrated the highlands, support for the emperor melted away. At the Battle of Magdala (see [Map 21.4](#)), Tewodros was only able to field 4,000 troops and these were quickly overcome. Tewodros himself committed suicide rather than face capture ([Figure 21.6](#)). The British looted the capital and withdrew, their honour satisfied, and Europeans were left with a false sense of the ease with which Ethiopia might be conquered in the future.



The reunification and expansion of Ethiopia, up to 1896

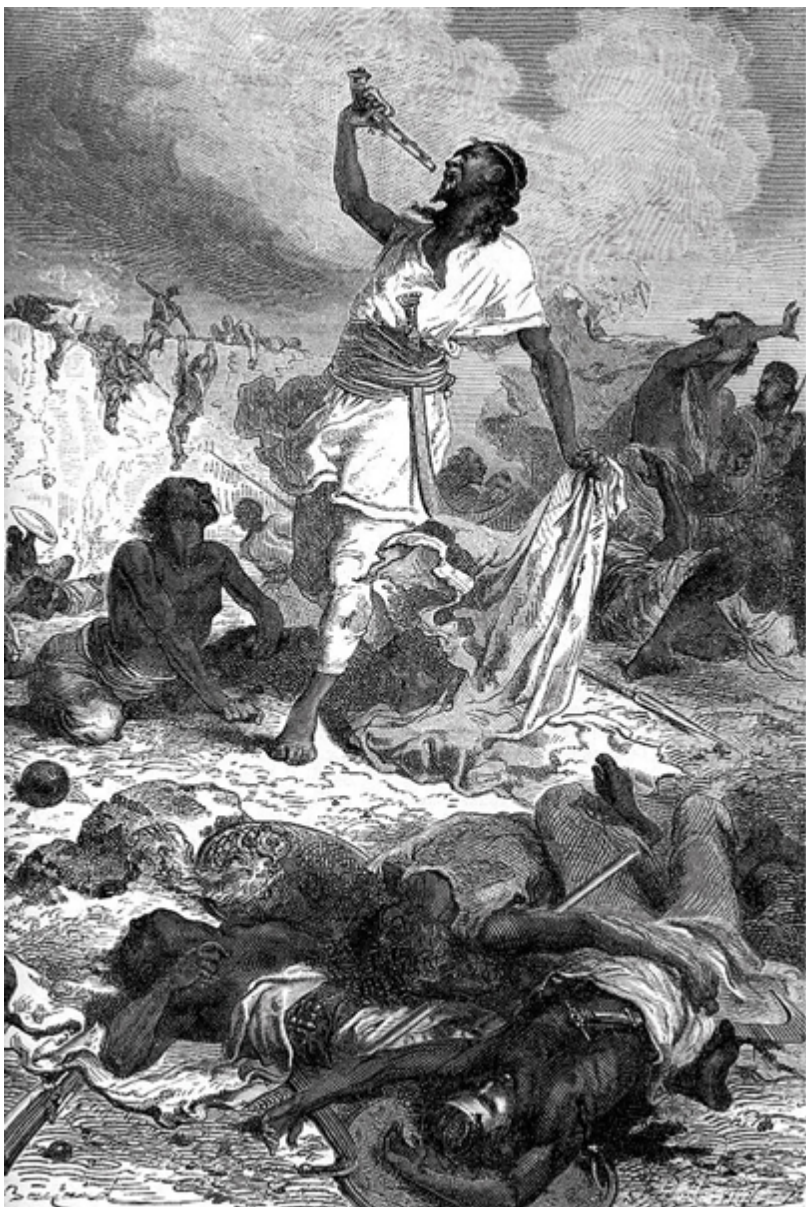
Dej Kassa of Tigray, who had assisted the British in their march through northern Ethiopia, declared himself Tewodros's successor. He had rivals to defeat and battles to win, but in January 1872, he had himself crowned as Johannes IV in Axum's Church of Mary, following elaborate ancient rituals to show his faith in Ethiopian tradition.

Johannes abandoned the practice of appointing salaried officials as

district governors and judges and returned much of their former power to the regional nobility. This regained him the support of most of the powerful princes of Ethiopia, but it left the feudal system firmly entrenched in Ethiopian society. With the wide support that he could now command, Johannes was able to summon a large Christian army to repel the threat from Muslim Egypt in the north. The other main external threat came from the east where the Italians had declared a colony over the ports of Assab and Massawa in 1882 and 1885 respectively. Johannes defeated a force of 500 Italians at the Battle of Dogali in 1887. Johannes, however, never established complete control over the whole of Ethiopia. He faced constant opposition from his rival to the throne, Menelik of the southern Christian kingdom of Shoa.

Menelik had for years been strengthening his position in the southern regions of the empire. He built up a large and powerful army, equipped with rifles and artillery bought from French and Italian traders on the coast. While Johannes was still on the throne and defending the empire from the Italians, Menelik was expanding his power to the east. He captured the Muslim city of Harar and made it the centre of his arms trade with the French at the Gulf of Tadjoura (Djibouti).

Figure 21.6 The suicide of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia, after his defeat by the British at the Battle of Magdala, 1868. By Emile Bayard, in Cassell's *Illustrated History of the World*.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Menelik succeeded to the imperial throne on the death of Johannes in 1889. He established his capital in the Shoan heartland at Addis Ababa and proceeded to expand the empire in the south by military conquest (see [Map 21.4](#)). Non-Christian Oromo, Sidama and Somali were brought within the empire and vast estates in the region were given out to Shoan military governors and notables.

In the north, Menelik was confronted by the imperial ambitions of Italy. He was forced to recognise the Italian coastal colony of Eritrea,

over which they had extended their authority between 1887 and 1890. But an Italian attempt to extend their conquests into the Ethiopian heartland was faced with resounding defeat by Menelik's vastly superior army. Menelik's victory at the Battle of Adwa ([Figure 21.7](#)) in 1896 effectively saved Ethiopia from European colonial conquest during the era of the 'Scramble for Africa'.

Figure 21.7 The Battle of Adwa in which Menelik's Ethiopian forces defeated the Italians: Brigadier General Dabormida's troops encounter fierce resistance. Illustration in *L'illustrazione Italiana*, 29 March 1896, p. 200.



Source: De Agostini/Getty Images.



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July 1854. Quoted in Flint, J.E. (ed.) (1976) *The Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 5, c.1790–c.1870 (CUP: Cambridge), p. 70.

SECTION 8



THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IMPERIALISM, LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY



Chapters 22 and 23 deal with the period of the so-called 'Scramble for Africa', in which the European imperial powers competed to conquer the continent during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Prior to this, European adventurers travelled through Africa in search of the routes of her major rivers, which were seen as the trading arteries into and out of the continent. Their books about their so-called 'discoveries' excited European interest and, as such, provided a prelude to the conquest to come. The 'scramble' itself and its motivations are discussed in some detail, and the following chapters relate a narrative of invasion, resistance and conquest. This story reveals the formation of the 'new states' that were arbitrarily imposed on the continent and the identity of the colonial power that would oversee them for the next two or three generations. This is significant, for a future generation of largely culturally assimilated African leaders would treat these colonial boundaries as sacrosanct. In doing so, the colonial powers and their successors left unresolved conflicts of cultural and political identity that were to plague independent Africa even into the twenty-first century.

The discovery of huge deposits of diamonds and gold in southern

Africa fed into ancient myths and compounded pre-existing mercantile ambitions. Combined with cultural hubris, this led to rival industrialising European powers adopting the classic imperial concept that ‘might is right’. That the subsequent invasion and conquest in the face of determined African resistance was so rapid is partly attributable to African failure to unite against a common enemy. This allowed the European powers – Britain, France, Germany and Portugal – to pick off one African opponent after another. The lack of African unity may have been due to a failure to realise until too late that they were facing a continental assault on an unprecedented industrial scale. However, even if unity were to have been achieved, it is doubtful that it would have done more than delay the inevitable, in the face of vastly superior weaponry and manufacturing resources. The scale of the slaughter produced by this military imbalance was partly enabled by a racist disregard for the value of African lives, and partly driven by a calculated desire to instil a level of fear that would safeguard European colonial rule. Nevertheless, although some small-scale African communities accepted the European intrusion as a relief from slave raiding, many more enacted acts of resistance that persisted through much of the first generation of colonial overrule.

Some African rulers, such as those in Botswana, western Zambia and Uganda, took the initiative ahead of full invasion and negotiated some less oppressive form of colonial overrule. Rulers of powerful states in west Africa who negotiated treaties with invading French forces, however, saw any trust in colonial integrity quickly betrayed. Likewise, those Africans who assisted British forces in the South African War of 1899–1902 found their faith in British justice badly misplaced in the face of imperial priorities.

During the ‘scramble’ of the late nineteenth century, European powers were careful to direct their military might against Africans rather than each other. Nevertheless, the ‘Scramble for Africa’ was an early sign of the European rivalry that would culminate in the Great War of 1914–18, when European powers would fight each other over colonial territory in Africa.

CHAPTER 22

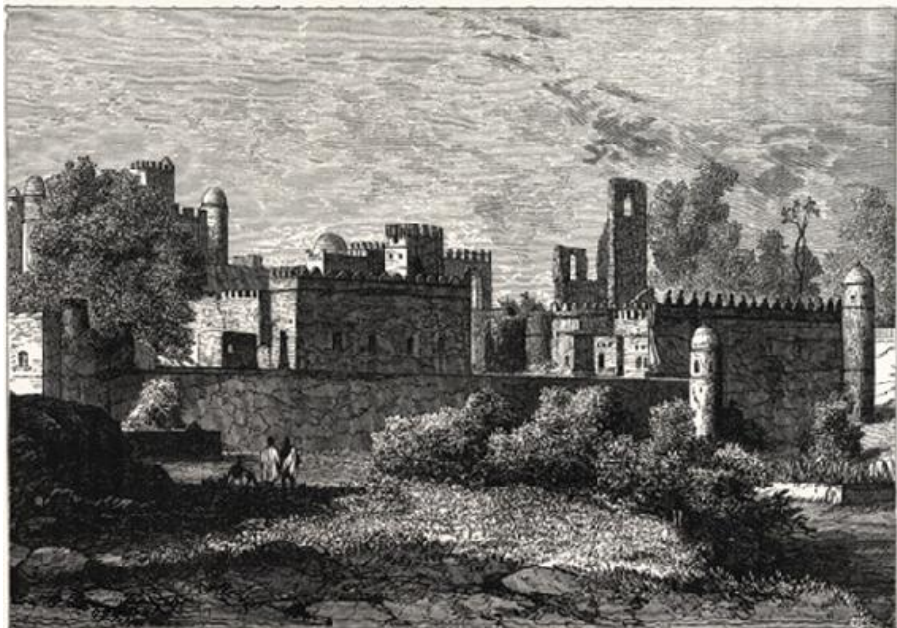
Colonial conquest and African

resistance in east, north-central and west Africa

European ‘explorers’: the mapping of Africa as a prelude to empire

In 1768, an eccentric Scottish nobleman named James Bruce set off on a lengthy journey to Ethiopia to see for himself the source of the Blue Nile (see [Map 22.1](#)). On his return to Europe in 1783, Bruce found that few would believe his stories of the splendours of Ethiopia and, in particular, its royal court at Gondar (see [Figure 22.1](#)). Bruce’s revelations did not fit the prejudiced European view of Africa as a mass of primitive and disorganised societies, little more than a source of slaves. Despite centuries of coastal trading contact, Europeans were still remarkably ignorant of Africa, its peoples and their history. European interest in Africa, however, was about to be awoken.

Figure 22.1 The Ethiopian capital of Gondar, as observed by James Bruce in the 1770s. On his return to Europe, readers of his book about his adventures refused to believe that such grand and complex buildings could possibly have been built by Africans.



Source: *Universal History Archive /Getty Images*.

It was the movement for the abolition of the slave trade that provided the stimulus for a revival of European interest in Africa. If Europeans were to benefit and to profit from the development of what they deemed 'legitimate commerce' with Africa (see [Chapter 17](#)), they needed a far wider knowledge of the continent. They needed knowledge of the transport potential of its great river systems. They needed to know the raw materials that Africans had to sell, and they needed to locate the main centres of population, which would form the new markets for European manufactured goods.

In 1788, a group of wealthy and influential Englishmen formed the African Association. Their immediate object was to send an expedition to visit the fabled city of Timbuktu and investigate the course of the River Niger. Africa was still known to Europeans as the principal source of gold in medieval times. The Malian king Mansa Musa's famous fourteenth-century pilgrimage to Mecca had seen to that. His lavish gifts of gold in Cairo had helped to raise Timbuktu in European mythology as a city of immeasurable wealth where even slaves were gold. As we saw in [Chapter 7](#), Timbuktu itself was never a source of gold, and its position as a major trading terminus had seriously declined in recent centuries. Nevertheless, this was the direction in which initial European journeys of exploration were aimed.

Between 1788 and 1877, European self-styled 'explorers' regularly set out into the heart of Africa in an attempt to rectify their ignorance of the continent. It seems that once the movement got under way,

barely a year went past without there being at least one European expedition engaged in exploring the interior of the continent. It can be argued, of course, that these European adventurers were not, in the strictest sense, ‘explorers’ at all. The word ‘exploration’ implies the investigation of something previously unknown, whereas there was no part of Africa that was not known to local African inhabitants as well as long-distance traders. Indeed, many parts of Africa, especially the Sahara and Sahel, had been well known to the Arabic-speaking world for hundreds of years before Europeans ‘discovered’ them.

European explorers, for the most part, followed well-worn long-distance trading routes, some even disguising themselves in Muslim dress in order to accompany trading caravans (see [Figure 22.2](#)). It is also worth observing that virtually every European explorer was dependent on African hospitality and travelled with the aid of African guides and servants. Some travelled with their own massive caravans of porters and armed retainers. Had these indispensable African assistants been literate and recorded their adventures, their fame within Africa today might have equalled that which their employers achieved in nineteenth-century Europe.

The European explorers of Africa before the 1850s have usually been portrayed by historians as motivated by a spirit of pure, disinterested, scientific enquiry. Many of them may have seen themselves in that light. Others were attracted by a sense of adventure, desire for fame or both. But it was taken for granted among those who financed the journeys, praised their ‘discoveries’ and avidly read their books that their major benefit to Europe was the chance of greater trading profit in the future. The constitution of the African Association even allowed for information gathered to be kept secret, if doing so was likely to be to the commercial advantage of Britain. Mungo Park, the African Association’s first successful explorer, clearly understood the prime intention of his journey. He described it as: ‘rendering the geography of Africa more familiar to my countrymen, and ... opening to their ambition and industry new sources of wealth, and new channels of commerce’.¹

Mungo Park visited the Niger twice (1795–7 and 1805–6), although he died in his attempt to follow the course of the river to the sea. Others followed his initiative, but it was 1827 before Frenchman René Caillé became the first European to return with a first-hand account of Timbuktu (see [Map 22.1](#)). Ironically, Caillé was disbelieved because his description of drab and dusty Timbuktu failed to live up to Europe’s golden expectations. This was in direct contrast to James Bruce, who had been disbelieved in 1783 because his description of Ethiopia had been too full of praise.

Figure 22.2 Richard Burton, adventurer, traveller and fluent Arabic speaker, in the costume he wore as a pilgrim to Mecca. He travelled in similar disguise when he visited the forbidden Muslim city of Harar in the remote eastern district of modern Ethiopia. He also led an expedition (not in disguise) to the inter-lake region of east Africa to identify the source of the Nile.



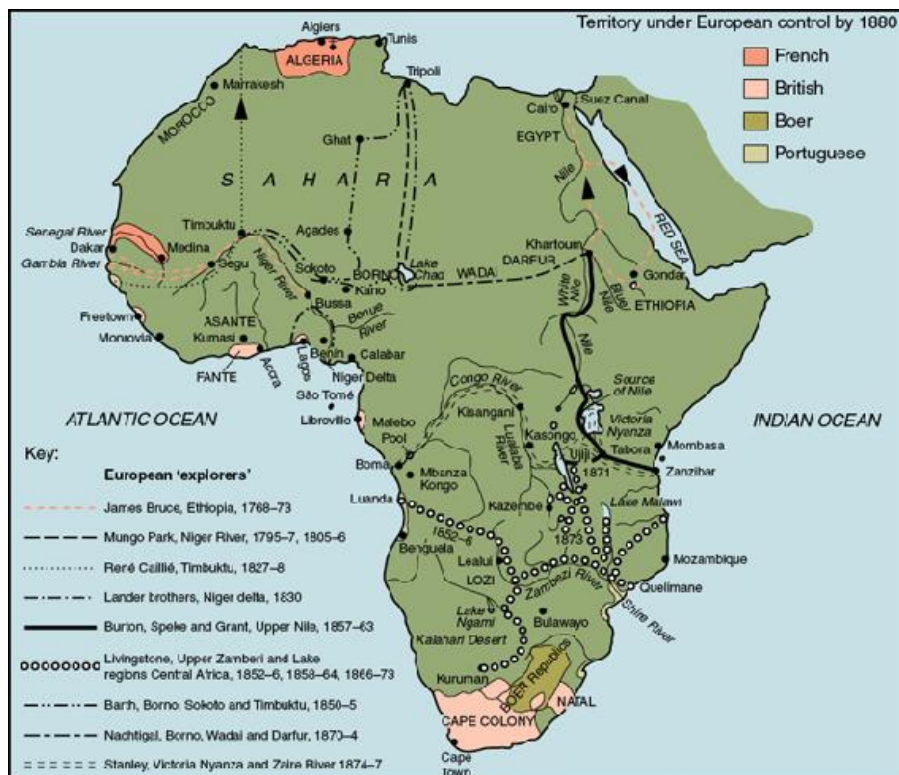
Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

In 1830, the Lander brothers finally traced the Niger to its mouth by sailing downstream from the inland town of Bussa (see [Map 22.1](#)). In doing so, they revealed to an excited Europe that the fever-ridden swamplands known as the ‘Oil Rivers’ were, in fact, the delta of the mighty Niger River. Here, at last, thought European merchants and

manufacturers, was a navigable waterway into the heart of the west African interior. But the high mortality rate from malarial fever managed to hold European explorers and traders at bay for a further two decades. The turning point came in the early 1850s, when it was discovered that doses of quinine provided reasonable protection from malarial fever. With this useful medical discovery, European exploration of Africa quickly gathered pace.

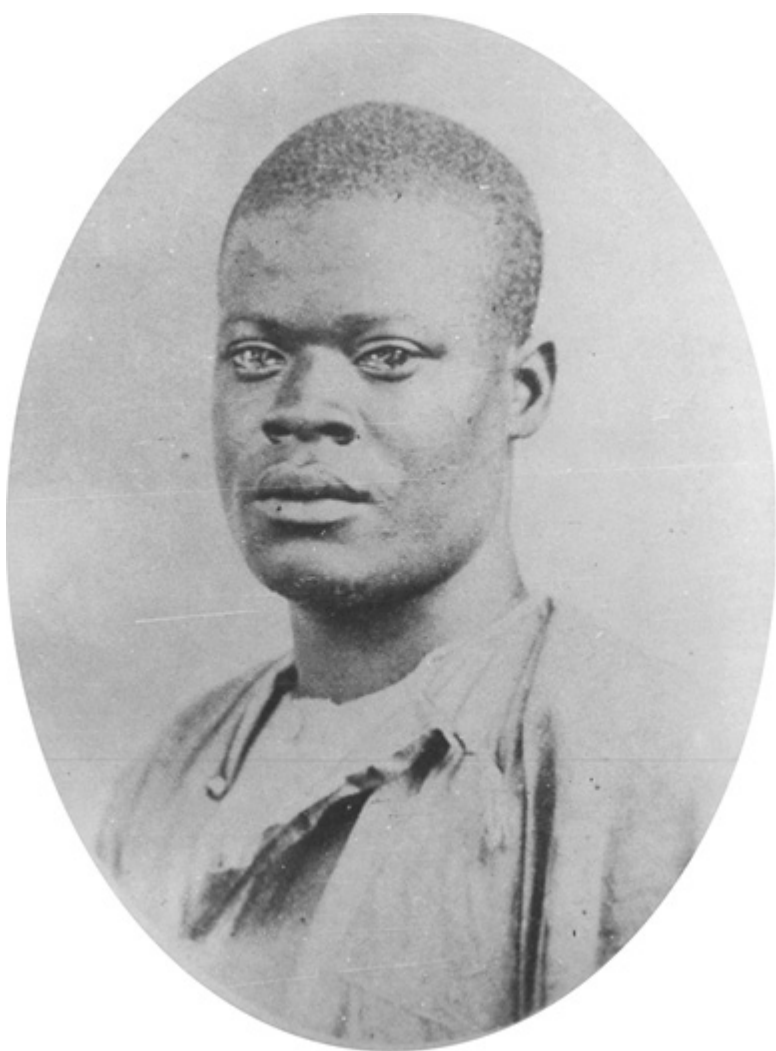
The main objects of European exploration in the 1850s, 60s and 70s were the courses of the other major rivers of Africa: the upper Nile, the Zambezi and the Congo. This intense interest in Africa's rivers was not fired simply by detached scientific curiosity. The rivers of Africa were viewed by Europeans as the primary trading arteries to and from the heart of the continent, playing the same role major rivers had played in Europe and north America before the age of rail. They were the 'highways' through which Europeans could 'open up' the continent to European trade and exploitation.

European penetration of Africa before 1880



During Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke's 1858–9 expedition to 'discover the source of the Nile', Speke became the first European to see the great east African *nyanza* (lake). It was he who named it after the British queen, Victoria. The following year Speke returned with James A. Grant to confirm that the Nile did indeed flow from the northern end of the lake. They also showed the river's navigable possibilities upstream from Khartoum (see [Map 22.1](#)). Further south, David Livingstone traversed the continent from the Zambezi to the west coast at Luanda (the then small Portuguese trading port that was to become the modern capital of Angola). It was on this journey that he witnessed the ravages of the still-active slave trade. He then crossed back across the continent to the east coast, concluding, wrongly, that the Zambezi provided a navigable route into the interior. He led a later expedition up the Shire River to Lake Malawi and devoted much of the remainder of his life to the exploration of the lake and river systems of south-central Africa (see [Map 22.1](#)). A former missionary himself, Livingstone was driven by a burning sense of mission. He preached that Christianity and European commerce were the only possible antidote to the evils of the slave trade that still survived in the region (see [Chapter 19](#)). As we've seen, his 'Christianity and commerce' mantra was to be taken up as an imperialist slogan and used to justify the colonial conquest that followed in Livingstone's footsteps.

Figure 22.3 Chuma, explorer companion to David Livingstone. On Livingstone's death in the Lake Bangweulu region of modern Zambia in 1873, Chuma supervised the embalming of the body. It was then taken in a caravan of 60 men, by Chuma and his companion Susi, to the coastal town of Bagamoyo for transportation to and burial in England. The journey took them ten months. They received little thanks and no reward from a parsimonious British government.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, two Germans, Heinrich Barth and Gustav Nachtigal, had explored the major trade routes of the Sahara and Sahel (see [Map 22.1](#)). Barth's detailed five-volume description of his travels remains a major source for historians of Sokoto and Borno. Because of the wealth of information in his detailed published journals, Barth has sometimes been portrayed as the last of the great disinterested scientific explorers. Yet, the prime purpose of his journey into sub-Saharan Africa (1850–5) was to assess for European merchants the trading potential of the Borno, Sokoto and Niger Bend regions. Although German in origin, Barth was partly sponsored by a group of British merchants. On their behalf, he sought from the sultan of Sokoto 'a letter of franchise guaranteeing to all British merchants

entire security for themselves and their property in visiting his dominions for trading purposes'. The sultan readily agreed to the request, although Barth was doubtful of his ability to meet the guarantee.

Earlier, while in Bagirmi, southeast of Lake Chad, Barth had been imprisoned as a spy and spent a few days shackled in leg irons. The experience gave him time to reflect:

I came to the conclusion that it would be absolutely necessary, in order to obtain the desired end, to colonise the most favourable tract of the country inclosed by the Kwara, Benuwe, and the River Kaduna [most of modern northern Nigeria], and thus to spread commerce and civilisation in all directions into the very heart of the continent.²

Despite his misgivings about the ability of local African rulers to ensure the security of European merchants in the African interior, Barth was thankful for the extent and success of local trade that he observed in the capital of Sokoto:

Figure 22.4 A battle between Stanley's expedition party and Bangala war canoes on the Congo River, 14 February 1877. Contemporary line engraving.



Source: ullstein bild Dtl./Contributor/Getty Images.

Friday, April 22 [1853] It was the great market-day, which was of some importance to me, as I had to buy a good many things ... The market was tolerably well attended, and well supplied, there being about thirty horses, three hundred head of cattle for slaughtering,

fifty *takérkere*, or oxen of burden, and a great quantity of leather ... the leather dressed and prepared here being very soft and beautiful. There were more than a hundred bridles for sale, the workmanship of which is very famous throughout all this part of Negroland; but especially a large quantity of iron was exposed for sale, the iron of Sokoto being of excellent quality and much sought for ... A good many slaves were exhibited ... It being just about the period when the salt-caravan visits these parts, dates also ... were to be had.³

It was Stanley who completed Livingstone's work by unravelling the mystery of Africa's remaining major river. In 1874–7, he crossed the continent from Zanzibar and sailed down the Congo from its upper tributary, the Lualaba, to its mouth at Boma (see [Map 22.1](#)). At the head of a heavily armed expedition, Stanley ruthlessly blasted his way downstream against fierce opposition from numerous riverine peoples (see [Figure 22.4](#)). The latter rightly saw their control of ancient trading routes perilously threatened.

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the colonial period, Europeans referred to this great equatorial river as the Congo, after the Kongo people and kingdom to the south of its lower reaches. Formerly, Portuguese sources had referred to it as the Zaire, from an adaptation of a Kikongo word, *nzere* ('river'). African names for the river varied widely throughout its length. For 20 years from the mid-1970s, the river and the republic were renamed Zaire, but the river reverted to the name Congo and the country to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997.

For some years, European merchants had pushed their contacts and control over trading routes further into the continent from their coastal bases. In the case of the French on the Senegal River, they had the military support of their home government, which, by the 1860s, had established a narrow riverine colony as far east as Medina. Similarly, in 1874, the British government declared their protectorate of the Gold Coast to be a Crown Colony when the kingdom of Asante challenged the British trading monopoly in the region. Meanwhile, British merchants were exploiting the disunity of the Niger Delta states and extending control over much of the trade of the lower Niger River. Now, in 1877, Stanley suddenly revealed the vast navigable possibilities of the Congo River basin. As the British hesitated, King Leopold II of Belgium seized the opportunity and sent Stanley back to the Congo mouth with orders to construct a roadway linking Boma

with Malebo Pool (which he renamed ‘Stanley Pool’). It was, in effect, a colonising expedition.

The Belgian king’s initiative merely added impetus to the already gathering pace of European competition for control of the natural wealth and trade of Africa. Much of Africa remained to be ‘mapped’, but, from now on, European ‘explorers’ were generally direct agents of colonial expansion.

The ‘Scramble for Africa’

Ever since the emergence of so-called ‘legitimate commerce’ in place of the Atlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century, European merchants had been increasingly interested in gaining access to and control of the trading systems of the African interior. As we saw above, it was with this in mind that European, especially British, merchant classes supported and often financed the investigation of Africa’s river systems by European ‘explorers’. The rivers of Africa were viewed by Europeans as the primary trading arteries to and from the heart of the continent.

By the early 1870s, European trading companies were pushing up the major rivers of Africa’s western coastline. But they still generally recognised African authority and operated through alliances with local African rulers. At either end of the continent, the French had occupied Algeria and the Ottomans nominally controlled Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, while the British and Boers had taken control of much of South Africa. But within tropical Africa, foreign incursion was generally confined to small coastal enclaves (see [Map 22.1](#)). The authority of the Arab rulers of Zanzibar did not extend much beyond the adjacent coastal towns and islands of east Africa. Portugal had long maintained claims to an African empire in Mozambique and Angola, but their authority extended little beyond the coast or river valley. In west Africa, the French had pushed up the Senegal valley in support of French trading interests, but at this stage theirs was still a narrow riverine colony. Meanwhile, the British controlled coastal Sierra Leone and a small coastal colony at Lagos; and they were on the verge of annexing their protectorate of coastal modern Ghana as the crown colony of Gold Coast. But even with these foreign incursions, the vast majority of the African continent remained under indigenous African rule in the early 1870s.

Between 1880 and 1900, the whole tone and tempo of Afro-European contact changed. By the end of the century, a massive

colonial onslaught, known as the European ‘Scramble for Africa’, had brought most of the continent within the sphere of some European colonial empire. But what led to this dramatic turn of events, and how was it possible that independent Africa was apparently so quickly overrun? Historians have argued long and hard over the relative importance of various ‘causes’ and no doubt will continue to do so. It is only possible here to refer to some of the principal background factors.



For more analysis of the various motivations behind the European land grab in Africa, see this book *The Scramble for Africa* on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

The European background

Britain's position as the leading industrial nation in the world had remained unchallenged until the second half of the nineteenth century. From the early nineteenth century, Britain was an expanding imperial power. Its imperialism, however, was to some extent ‘informal’. It did not need to control territory as such, so long as it was free to trade wherever it wanted. Thus, it suited Britain to promote a policy of European ‘free trade’ in Africa, that is, no one European nation was to interfere with the right of another to freely trade in Africa. In practice, this meant British domination of Africa's external trade, as Britain produced the cheapest European manufactured goods in the largest quantity and had the largest merchant navy for shipping them to Africa.

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, however, two important new factors had entered the scenario. First, Britain's position as leading industrial nation was being challenged, in particular by France and Germany, which meant that Britain could no longer maintain its ‘informal’ empire through free trade alone. (Although the USA had caught up with Britain in terms of industrial technology and manufacturing, its focus remained on the other side of the Atlantic to Europe and Africa.) The second factor was the rise of finance capital. By the late nineteenth century, bankers and financiers in the City of London carried more political weight than industrialists

alone. The British pound sterling was the currency of world trade (giving way to the US dollar only in the twentieth century) and there was a rapid expansion of British overseas investment in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As British financial capital searched for and found new investments (initially, in Egypt and South Africa), British industrialists poured cloth, clothing, alcohol, guns and metal manufactured goods into Africa in search of new markets. With European industrial and trading competition approaching more equal terms, the British position of 'free trade' gave way to 'protectionism'. Britain's main trading rivals, France, and later Germany, decided that the way to beat British competition was to establish their own colonies or 'protected' areas in Africa, from where the trade of other European nationals could be excluded or heavily taxed.

There was a widespread European belief that vast stretches of the African interior contained huge quantities of untapped wealth and raw materials. The tropical forests of western Africa had already proved a valuable source of vegetable oils. Ivory was a fast-wasting asset, but rubber from the tropical forests was about to enter a boom time. Finally, the discovery of huge deposits of diamonds and gold in southern Africa in the 1870s and 80s heightened expectations for the whole of the continent.

European partition of Africa would clearly happen only once, and even less industrialised European nations joined in the rush to stake a claim to part of the continent, in anticipation of quick profits or to safeguard markets for the future. The possession of colonies in Africa quickly became a point of national prestige within Europe.

The rapid colonial conquest of Africa was only possible, however, because of two important factors. First, colonists were able to exploit traditional and long-standing rivalries between African states. Thus, some African rulers accepted a European alliance or treaty of 'protection' in the belief that it would protect them from traditional African enemies. It was only when those traditional enemies had been brutally conquered that the full implications of European 'protection' became clear. No African leader knowingly and willingly signed away his birthright, although this was how the 'protecting' European power usually chose to interpret the treaties.

Second, Europe held an important advantage in military technology. In earlier centuries, African rulers had generally been able to hold their own against invading European armies. They built up their own arsenals of muzzle-loading guns and made skilful use of more traditional weapons and guerrilla tactics. In the 1870s and 80s, however, African armies were rapidly overtaken by advances in

European weaponry. First came the breech-loading repeater rifle, to be followed in 1889 by the Maxim gun, the world's first highly mobile, recoil-operated machine gun. Possession of the Maxim gun transformed European military fortunes in Africa. Its use was often crucial in the final crushing of resistance. Old, outmoded European guns had for years been freely sold to Africans, but restrictions were placed on the sale of the latest models. Although most African armies of resistance acquired a number of breech-loading rifles, none acquired a Maxim gun. In 1898, British anti-imperialist poet Hilaire Belloc summed up his countrymen's position in the famous sarcastic couplet:

Whatever happens, we have got
The Maxim gun, and they have not.

The 'scramble' takes off

In 1879, the French threw down a challenge to European 'free trade' in Africa. They started constructing a railway from Dakar to link their colony of Senegal with the upper Niger valley. In this way, the French government hoped to gain control of a huge protected market across the Sahelian and savannah regions of west Africa. In 1882, they occupied Tunisia and proclaimed French protectorates over Porto Novo on the west African coast ([Map 22.2](#)) and Pointe Noire just north of the mouth of the Congo. Porto Novo lay between the British coastal colonies of Gold Coast and Lagos, and thus France's acquisition broke Britain's near-monopoly on west Africa's south-facing coastline. Pointe Noire gave France overland access to Malebo Pool and thus opened up the whole question of 'free trade' on the navigable Congo River.

Stanley had already established claims along the south bank of Malebo Pool on behalf of the 'International Association', which was a front for King Leopold of Belgium. The British responded by supporting Portuguese claims to Angola and the Congo mouth. By this time, it was becoming clear that Britain's 'temporary' occupation of Egypt (since 1882; see [Chapter 21](#)) was likely to be fairly permanent, much to the annoyance of French investors in the country. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the German leader, saw the direction in which Anglo-French rivalry was heading and decided to act while there was still some of Africa left to colonise. In 1884, he proclaimed German protectorates over Togo, Kamerun (Cameroon) and South West Africa (Namibia). He then invited the major European powers to Berlin to discuss the issue of maintaining free navigation along the Niger and

Congo Rivers.

The Berlin Conference (1884–5) was an attempt by European leaders to impose some kind of international European agreement on to the carving-up of Africa that was already under way. It did not decide on any colonial boundaries as such, but it did settle two important principles. First, it recognised Leopold's so-called 'International Association' as the legitimate authority in the Congo Basin. In return, the Belgian king agreed to allow European traders and missionaries free access to the area. Based on this Berlin recognition, Leopold proclaimed his own personal kingdom, the 'Congo Free State', in 1885. Second, the Berlin Conference agreed that a European claim to any part of Africa would only be recognised by other European governments if it was 'effectively occupied' by that particular European power. This was a deliberate tactic by Bismarck to undermine British claims over its vague, informal 'spheres of influence'. Within days of the ending of the conference in February 1885, Bismarck put this principle into practice. He proclaimed a German protectorate in the heart of Britain's east African 'sphere of influence'. The grounds on which he claimed 'effective occupation' were that a German agent, Carl Peters, had recently travelled the region and collected a handful of 'treaties' from local rulers. The result of Bismarck's proclamation was the colony of 'German East Africa', later renamed Tanganyika (modern mainland Tanzania).

European territorial claims to Africa on the eve of the Berlin Conference, 1884



Later that year, an Anglo-German treaty settled the Uganda-Tanganyika boundary well to the south of Buganda. In partial exchange, the British offered, among other things, a narrow strip of land north of Botswana, linking German South West Africa with the Zambezi. Named the Caprivi Strip, after Bismarck's successor as German chancellor, this was supposed to provide navigable access to German East Africa (Tanganyika). In fact, as such it was worthless, being just upstream of the largest waterfall in the world, a fact well known to the British who 30 years previously had named it Victoria Falls.

Figure 22.5 The German eagle swooping over Africa: a British cartoonist's view of

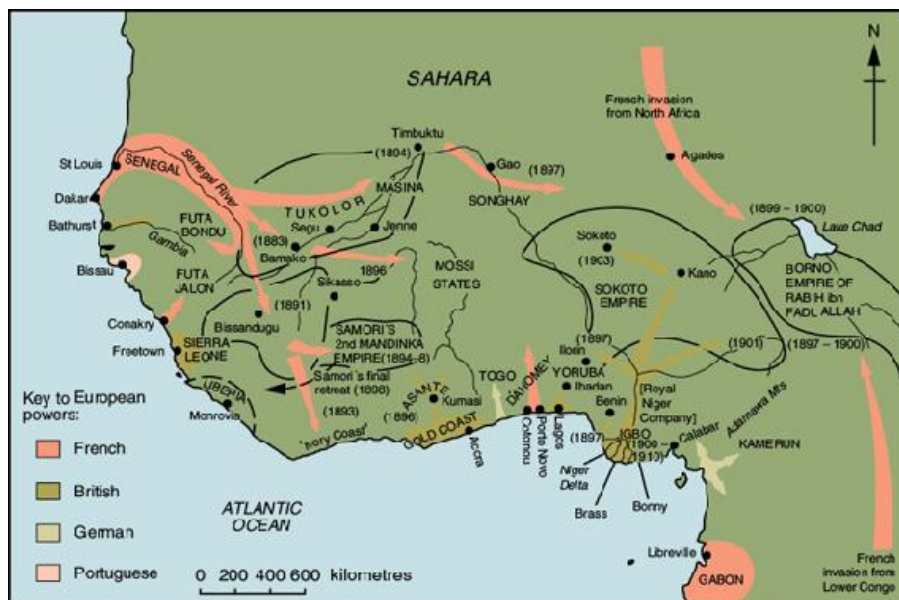
German ambitions in east Africa, *Punch*, 1890. Although the British and Germans had divided the territory east of the Victoria Nyanza in 1885–6, land north and west of the lake was still unallocated. In 1890, the Germans announced that their agent Carl Peters had signed a treaty with King Mwanga of Buganda. The British were horrified: the kingdom controlled access to the source of the Nile, the lifeblood of British-occupied Egypt, hence the cartoon.



ON THE SWOOP!

Source: © Punch Limited, Reproduced with permission.

West Africa in the era of the 'scramble'



A series of European treaties during 1890–1 confirmed many of the internal colonial boundaries of the African continent (see [Map 22.3](#)). The Sahara and Sahel were still largely not defined and most of the territory 'acquired' was far from being 'effectively occupied' by Europeans. Africans did not lightly lay down their independence and the 1890s was a period of widespread African resistance to the European invasion.

Conquest and resistance

The French in west and north-central Africa

The French colonisation of Senegal had been built originally around the trading ports of Dakar and St Louis. In the 1850s and 60s, Louis Faidherbe, governor of Senegal, had extended French control up the Senegal valley to secure French trading interests and forestall the westward expansion of the Tukolor Empire. He achieved these conquests by building up a highly disciplined Senegalese army, locally recruited and trained in the use of the most up-to-date weaponry from Europe. It was this Senegalese army, commanded largely by local Afro-French officers, which provided the French with their main frontline troops for the conquest of western Africa in the 1880s and

90s.

Between 1879 and 1881, the French began an aggressive policy of widespread colonisation in west Africa. They pushed towards the upper Niger, building a series of forts between Senegal and Bamako (the town that was to become the capital of modern Mali). They started constructing a railway along this route, hoping to draw off through Senegal the bulk of the trade of the western Sahel.

The principal opponents of French expansion in the western Sahel were the Tukolor Empire under the rule of Ahmadu Seku, the son and successor to al-Hajj Umar, and the new expanding Mandinka Empire of Samori Touré (see [Chapter 16](#)). Both Ahmadu and Samori initially tried diplomacy rather than military conflict with the French Senegalese army. But each acted individually and as historic rivals, they could not bring themselves to unite in their opposition to this new foreign intrusion from the west.

Ahmadu concluded an alliance with the French, which he believed secured him French recognition of the Tukolor Empire. By 1883, however, the French, in defiance of the treaty, had constructed a line of forts right across southern Tukolor as far as Bamako (see [Map 22.3](#)). Nevertheless, Ahmadu still showed his good faith in the alliance. In 1885–7, he supported the French in their war against Mahmadu Lamine's Muslim state of Futa Bondu, between the upper Gambia and Senegal rivers. But it soon became clear that the French had never had any intention of respecting treaties with independent west African states. A further Franco-Tukolor treaty in 1887 gained the empire little more security, and two years later the French launched an assault on Tukolor's border fortresses. As was to happen so often over the next decade, French use of artillery firing explosive shells proved decisive in securing them victory over opposing west African forces.

But even after the French took Segou in 1890, Ahmadu's army refused to surrender. They conducted a fighting retreat as far as Masina where they held out until 1893. Ahmadu was only finally defeated because the French were able to exploit political divisions within the empire. They formed an alliance with Ahmadu's brother, whom they made puppet ruler of Masina once Ahmadu had been removed. Although Ahmadu died in exile in Sokoto, many of his scattered forces moved south to join Samori and so continue the unequal struggle against the invading infidel.

Samori (see [Figure 16.2](#)) was France's single most formidable military opponent in western Africa. He commanded an army of 30,000 men, mostly foot soldiers, but containing an élite corps of cavalry. They were well armed with muskets and rifles, imported from

Sierra Leone or manufactured and repaired by his own Mandinka metalworkers. In addition, the state was strengthened by a uniting sense of Mandinka nationalism, which recalled the glories of the ancient Malian empire.

After initial border clashes in the early 1880s, a Mandinka-French treaty was concluded in 1887. This was supposed to secure Samori's northeastern boundary along the line of the Niger. But as with their Tukolor treaties, the French regarded such alliances as only temporary tactics. At this crucial period in Mandinka-French relations, Samori's grip on the region was critically weakened. His army suffered heavily in an exhausting siege of the Sikasso capital on his northeastern border. And in 1888, he was faced with an internal revolt against his abortive attempt to forcibly convert the Mandinka to Islam.

In 1891, the French invaded from the north. Samori had no desire to meet the French Senegalese army in full open battle for he had no answer to their heavy artillery and machine guns. Instead, he ordered a 'scorched-earth' policy as he conducted a tactical withdrawal from the capital Bissandugu. The result was devastating for the heartland of the empire, as standing crops and whole villages were left in smouldering ruins. But it meant that the French army ran short of supplies and had to abandon their invasion in 1892.

Realising the insecurity of his military position, Samori then commenced an amazing undertaking. Between 1892 and 1894, he shifted his entire empire to the east, to a region on the northern borderlands of modern Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. But even here there was no peace for the Mandinka, for they themselves were now foreign conquerors and faced the internal opposition of a subject people. Further retreat eastwards was blocked by Asante, which fell to the British in 1896. Unable to secure a protectorate from the British, Samori was forced to fight it out with the French. In spite of being cut off from their Sierra Leone arms suppliers, the Mandinka army still scored some important victories over the French. In the end, it was famine that finally defeated Samori's troops in the mountains north of Liberia in 1898. Samori gave himself up to the French and was exiled to Libreville in Gabon, where he died in 1900 aged 70.

In the central Sahel, the main resistance to French conquest was led by Rabih ibn Fadl Allah, the conqueror of Borno. Originating from the Nile valley of Sudan, Rabih rose to prominence as a military commander for a Sudanese raider-trader who dealt in ivory and slaves. Following the founding of the Mahdist state in Sudan in 1885 (see [Chapter 21](#)), Rabih set up his own military state in the Bahr el-Ghazal. The basis of his power was his army, the core of which was highly mobile cavalry, armed with imported rifles, which he used to

raid and subdue the surrounding countryside.

Figure 22.6 A French gunboat suppresses African resistance in Dahomey (now Benin). Although the Dahomians appear to be well armed, it is mostly with muzzle-loading hunting guns. Illustration by H. Meyer in *Le Petit Journal*, 20 August 1892.



Source: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

Seeing himself as a disciple of the Mahdi, Rabih gradually pushed his conquests westwards until, in 1893, he reached Lake Chad and conquered the state of Borno. There he set up a form of military dictatorship, which was, in many ways, fairer and less corrupt than the Borno aristocracy that had preceded it. Taxes were at least fixed and charged only once a year. And most of the state's income was spent on the army and defence rather than on personal luxuries for the ruler. But Rabih remained a foreign conqueror, and for most of his short reign, he faced internal opposition to his rule. Villages were constantly raided by the army for supplies of food, which led to a

serious decline in agriculture as well as fanning unrest. The main threat to Rabih's rule, however, came from invading French forces which, by the end of the century, were challenging his independence. The French knew little about Rabih and were surprised by the strength of his resistance, but in April 1900, two major French armies converged upon Borno. Although Rabih himself was defeated and killed, the struggle was continued by his son, Fadl Allah ibn Rabih. He withdrew the remnants of his forces into northeastern Nigeria, hoping for British recognition as the ruler of Borno. But the British, anxious to avoid a military clash with the French, offered him no protection. He was pursued by the French and killed in battle in 1901.

Dahomey was conquered by a French Senegalese army in 1892–4 in a move that was initially welcomed by many Yoruba as liberation from Dahomian tyranny. To the west of the British Gold Coast, Cote d'Ivoire was proclaimed a French colony in 1893, but its military subjugation was not so easily achieved. There was no centralised authority for the French to overthrow and it was more than 20 years before the numerous forest chiefdoms were forced into submission.

The British in west Africa

Although the British did not conquer as much territory as the French, they ended up with two of the wealthiest states in the region, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria. Both of these were based on coastal trading enclaves in which the British were already well established.

In the early 1870s the British had acquired a trading monopoly along the Gold Coast, having bought out the last remaining Dutch and Danish trading forts. They were then in a position to charge customs duties on imports and exports without fear of losing trade to Dutch or Danish competition. This provided finance for a colonial administration, and in 1874 they proclaimed a colony over the coastal Fante states.

On a number of occasions earlier in the century, the British had done battle with Asante, who wanted to prevent foreign domination of the coastal trade. In order to assert their new authority at the coast, therefore, the British invaded Asante in 1874, defeated the Asante army and burnt their capital Kumasi. On this occasion, wishing to avoid the expense of formal colonial administration, the British withdrew their forces from Asante. By 1895, however, under the rule of Asantehene Prempe, Asante power had revived. At the same time, the British found it necessary to assert their claims to the Gold Coast hinterland in the face of French advances against Samori. So, in 1895–6, the British again invaded the Asante kingdom. In the face of British

military superiority, the Asante military leaders tactically avoided battle. The kingdom was occupied and a British protectorate was proclaimed over most of the region of modern Ghana. But the Asante army had remained intact and in 1900 they seized their opportunity and rose against the British. In the war that followed, the Asante scored a number of victories and nearly expelled the British from Ghana. In due course, however, British reinforcements arrived from Sierra Leone and Nigeria. The Asante army was overcome and the colony of Gold Coast was proclaimed over the whole of what is now modern Ghana. Prempeh, his family and retainers were all exiled to the Seychelles.

It is interesting to note that most indigenous rulers who had resisted French and British invasion, and who were not killed in battle, were exiled rather than executed. Perhaps this was a tacit recognition that they were legitimate rulers who were only defending their nations. On the other hand, there was probably also a more pragmatic realisation that, even in defeat, these figures still had huge popular support and could become a focus of continued resistance if allowed to remain in their own country, even if imprisoned. These demonstrations of 'mercy' also played well in Europe to the propaganda of 'benevolent empire'.

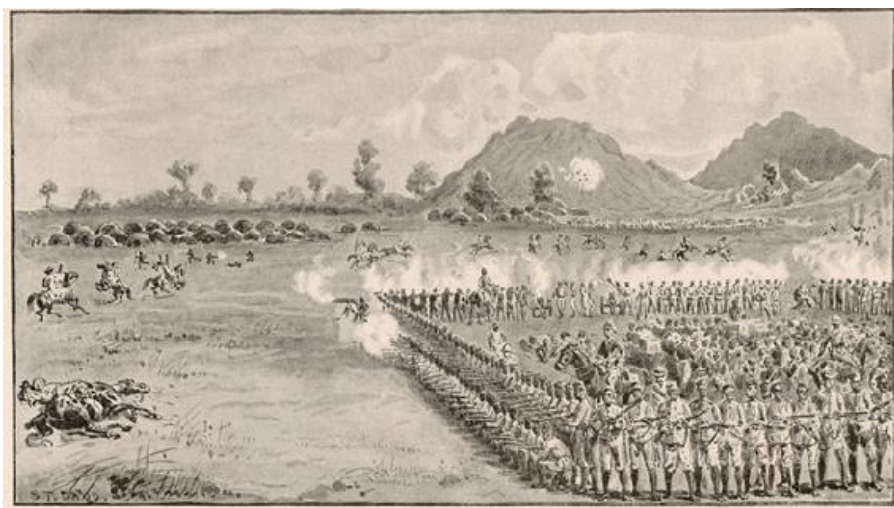
Until the 1880s, the only official British possession within what was to become Nigeria was a small coastal colony at Lagos. By the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, however, the British had obtained a virtual trading monopoly over palm oil exports from the Niger Delta and the lower Niger River. Several British trading companies had been united by George Goldie into the National African Company. As a result, Goldie's company controlled virtually all the palm oil exports between the Niger/Benue confluence and the Delta. Goldie was thus able to keep prices down and secure large profits for the company. After Berlin, the British government quickly affirmed its position in the region by declaring a protectorate over the Delta and granting a royal charter (document of approval) to Goldie's company to rule the lower Niger in the name of Britain. The company now became known as the Royal Niger Company. Rival African traders like the men of Brass were excluded from the palm oil trade by force. And Delta merchant princes, such as Jaja of Opobo, who refused to trade on British terms, were threatened with gunboats and deposed.

Between 1892 and 1902, most of the vast inland territory of modern Nigeria was gradually brought under British rule. But much of

the region had to be taken by force, for the various Nigerian peoples fought hard against their conquerors. Like the French, the British used African soldiers for the bulk of their frontline troops. Under the command of British officers, they were turned into highly disciplined, full-time professional battalions, equipped with the latest rifles, heavy artillery and machine guns. And the traditional lack of African unity in the region meant that British forces were able to take on one African state at a time. Most of Yorubaland was conquered in 1892–3, although the Royal Niger Company did not manage to conquer Ilorin, the Yoruba province of Sokoto, until 1897. Meanwhile, it took the British two years to oust Nana, ruler of Benin River, from his defensive position in the forest swamps. The state of Benin City was taken in 1897 after fierce fighting. The British ruthlessly sacked the city and looted its most valued historic treasures (see [Figure 22.8](#)).

The Sokoto Caliphate was overcome between 1900 and 1903. The organisation of the empire as a loose federation of semi-independent emirates meant that the British general, Frederick Lugard, was able to pick off one emirate after another. The massed charges of Hausa cavalry were no match for Lugard's disciplined squares of riflemen and machine gunners, and the walls of their cities were easily breached by British artillery. In 1903, with only Sokoto itself remaining unconquered, Caliph Attahiru conducted an orderly withdrawal eastwards towards the modern republic of Sudan.

Figure 22.7 Soldiers of the British Royal Niger Company form a square to attack the camp of the emir of Lapaie and subdue west African resistance to British colonial efforts. Note the British use of machine guns. Illustration by S.T. Dadd from a sketch by Major Arthur Festing, reproduced in *The Graphic*.



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

In the end, the British in Nigeria, like the French in Cote d'Ivoire, faced some of their toughest opposition from those small groupings of so-called 'stateless' peoples who had no large centralised authority that could be overthrown in one pitched battle. Thus, the British spent years campaigning against the Igbo and others in the forest country of southeastern Nigeria. It was 1910 before all the villages of Igboland were finally forced to accept the reality of British overrule.

Figure 22.8 Plunder at Benin, 1897. Hundreds of bronze plaques, which had decorated the oba's palace walls since medieval times (see Chapter 12), were ripped off, collected here and sold to private European individuals and museums, most of them ending up in the British Museum in London.



Source: © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Reproduced with permission.

The Congo Basin

French claims to the Congo Basin stemmed from a treaty concluded in 1880 between the French explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza and Makoko, the ruler of the Tio Kingdom just north of Malebo Pool (see [Map 22.4](#)). De Brazza claimed that Makoko ceded his sovereign rights to France. We have no record of Makoko's understanding of the agreement. If he did, indeed, agree to any form of French 'protection', it is possible that he sought a European ally in the face of encroachment from King Leopold's agent Henry Morton Stanley.

Nicknamed *bula matari*, ‘breaker of rocks’, Stanley was busy using forced labour to build a road from Boma to Malebo Pool. His reputation during his violent descent of the river in 1876–7 was well known to the peoples of the lower Congo. It is likely, therefore, that Makoko saw Stanley’s return to the region in 1879 as a direct threat to the safety of his people.

At the Berlin Conference (1884–5), the French used de Brazza’s treaties to establish their claim to territory north of the lower Congo. In the late 1880s, de Brazza was sent out to ‘negotiate’ further treaties in the region. He used a small Senegalese force to push French claims and plant administrative and trading posts up the lower Congo and its northern tributary, the Ubangui. No large-scale African resistance was organised at this stage and, with no major African kingdom to conquer, initial French presence in the region was not unduly aggressive. Treaties were signed in exchange for trivial ‘gifts’ of metal goods, cloth and alcohol, and it is unlikely that their implications were explained or realised by the African rulers concerned. By the early 1890s, the French had established their equatorial colonies of Gabon, Moyen (‘Middle’) Congo (modern Republic of the Congo) and Ubangui-Chari (modern Central African Republic) (see [Map 22.4](#)). Widespread African resistance came later when private French companies were granted authority to exploit the region (see [Chapter 24](#)).

The Congo Basin and Angola in the era of the ‘scramble’



South of the French sphere, the bulk of the Congo Basin fell to King Leopold of Belgium and his so-called 'Congo Free State' ([Map 22.4](#)). The state was only 'free' in the sense that Leopold had agreed at the Berlin Conference (1884–5) to allow freedom of navigation on the Congo for other European powers. It was also free from any Belgian government control from Europe and, as such, was the personal empire of Leopold himself (see [Figure 22.9](#)). It was, of course, anything but free for its African population, who, under Leopold, suffered one of the continent's most oppressive colonial regimes. The nature of this regime will be fully discussed in [Chapter 24](#). It is sufficient to record here the initial establishment of and resistance to colonial authority in the region.

According to the Berlin Conference and subsequent European agreements, the authority of Leopold's Congo state extended over

most of the Congo basin south of the Ubangui and as far as the 'copperbelt' region of the Zambezi-Congo watershed. The main potential opponents of Leopold's authority within this vast equatorial empire were the Swahilis under Tippu Tip (see [Chapter 19](#)) in the east and Msiri's Yeke kingdom in the southeast 'copperbelt' region of Katanga.

Figure 22.9 King Leopold II of Belgium, whose employees brutally exploited the peoples and resources of the Congo Basin, ruled the territory as his personal fiefdom from 1885 to 1908. The brutality of his rule was so excessive, even by colonial standards of the time, that he was forced by international pressure to hand over control of the country to the Belgian government in 1908.



Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Tippu Tip's Swahili federation dominated the Lualaba/Lomani region, which covered about a third of Leopold's potential Congo state. Tippu Tip attempted to head off the Congo Free State challenge from the west by claiming that he owed allegiance to the sultan of Zanzibar. By the late 1880s, however, the sultan of Zanzibar's authority had been seriously curtailed by British and German action in east Africa (see below). It was clear that Tippu Tip would receive no diplomatic protection from that quarter. In 1887, Tippu Tip was

persuaded to throw over his supposed allegiance to Zanzibar and accept the governorship of the Congo Free State's eastern provinces. This solution saved both sides a costly war and was of great advantage to the Congo Free State. The region's profitable ivory trade was no longer drained off towards the Zanzibari coast. From now on it passed westwards, through Congo Free State merchants' hands and subject to Congo Free State customs dues.

The arrangement may have kept Tippu Tip in power but it did not suit his fellow Swahili merchants. They resented the restrictions placed on their raiding activities and, in particular, the intrusion of rival European traders and the increasing presence of Congo Free State's motley mercenary army. The latter, the *Force Publique*, was officered by Europeans of various nationalities and was recruited from the local African population anxious to avenge the oppression of Swahili raiders. Relations were severely strained by the time Tippu Tip retired to Zanzibar in 1891. The following year, the local Belgian officer launched an all-out attack on Swahili strongholds. There followed 18 months of particularly brutal warfare before Swahili resistance was finally overcome.

Meanwhile, in the south, when it came to confrontation, Msiri's Yeke kingdom of Garenganze offered little effective resistance. Leopold was awoken to the region's great potential mineral wealth by the British South Africa Company (see [Chapter 23](#)), which sent its agents to Bunkeya in 1890. Msiri realised only too well the meaning of their treaties and he promptly sent them packing. When Leopold's own agents arrived in 1891, Msiri refused to allow the hoisting of the Congo Free State flag, declaring: 'I am the master here, and so long as I live, the Kingdom of Garenganze shall have no other'; at which point, a Belgian officer promptly shot him dead. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no attempt to avenge Msiri's death, beyond the immediate spearing of the man who shot him. Famine was in the land, the region was wracked by several years of drought, and Msiri's increasingly tyrannical rule in recent years had robbed him of his former loyal support.

The crucial importance of this Katanga region to the future colony of the Congo was revealed in 1892 when Congo Free State officers visited a local copper mine and carried samples of the copper back to Europe.

[The Portuguese in Angola](#)

In terms of industrial development, Portugal was weak, compared with her fellow European colonists in Africa. Because of this

weakness, Portugal could not afford to lose its ancient claims to colonies in Africa. Manufacturers needed their own protected markets, for they could not compete in the open market with their more powerful European rivals. Portuguese industrialists therefore pushed their government into more assertive action to try to make good her claims to the vast inland hinterland of Angola.

Portugal did not have the wealth to mount and support huge armies of occupation. So, in attempting the conquest of Angola, Portugal adopted the old technique of exploiting local rivalries. Punitive expeditions were often little more than African raiding parties, locally recruited from political rivals, armed with Portuguese guns and officered by Portuguese ex-convicts. Bakongo, Mbundu, Ovambo and Chokwe continued to defy Portuguese tax collectors until well into the twentieth century. This was partly because of the great rubber export boom of 1890–1905, which enabled Africans of the interior to buy guns from local Portuguese traders. It was only with the collapse of the rubber trade in 1910 (killed off by the establishment of rubber plantations in the British southeast Asian colony of Malaya) and the ban on arms sales to Africans in 1912 that the Portuguese government was finally able to make its authority felt throughout the colony of Angola.

British and Germans in east Africa

Until the 1870s, British policy in east Africa had been to support the sultan of Zanzibar's claim to much of the coastal territory of modern Kenya and Tanzania. This policy gave British merchants and missionaries free access to the region, while preventing rival Europeans from gaining a foothold on the mainland – all at no expense to the British government. British support had enabled the Saidi royal family to retain the throne of the sultanate against internal opposition in both Oman and Zanzibar. In return, however, the sultan had to bow to British demands for the gradual curtailment of the slave trade. This and the increasing interference of British consuls in Zanzibar created resentment towards the sultan by his Muslim subjects.

By the time of the Berlin Conference (1884–5), this policy no longer ensured British supremacy in the region. The sultan's power was negligible when faced with a determined European challenge. As we have seen above, Germany declared a protectorate over the Tanganyika mainland in February 1885. The British and German governments settled between them the northern and southwestern boundaries of 'German East Africa' in 1886 and 1890, while a narrow

coastal strip was officially leased from the sultan of Zanzibar (see [Map 22.5](#)).

Bismarck contracted the administration of the territory to a private commercial company whose violent demands for taxation and labour soon provoked spirited resistance within the colony. A Swahili revolt in 1888 was joined by reinforcements from the Hehe and the Yao, and the German colonists were nearly expelled from the territory. The revolt, known as the 'Abushiri revolt' after its leader Abu Bashir ibn Salim, an Arab sugar planter, was only finally overcome at the end of 1889 after the German government had taken direct control of the colony and brought out imperial reinforcements.

The Germans continued to face widespread resistance to their authority in the Tanganyikan interior and for years their trading caravans had to be heavily guarded by military patrols. In south-central Tanganyika, the Hehe conducted a successful campaign of guerrilla attacks against German patrols and trading caravans that lasted until 1898. Finally, facing defeat, their leader, Mkwawa, chose suicide rather than surrender. In the far southeast, the Yao held out until 1899. The Maasai in the north were considered serious potential opponents, but their power was rudely shattered by the spread of the deadly cattle disease, rinderpest, which wiped out most of their economic livelihood. Initial conquest in east Africa gave the Germans only a short breathing space. In the early 1900s, they were faced once again with widespread armed resistance in what has become known as the 'Maji Maji rising' (see [Chapter 24](#)).

British and German penetration of East Africa, 1884–1905



By an Anglo-German treaty of 1890, the region of modern Uganda was confirmed as falling within the British sphere. The British began by granting the administration and exploitation of their sphere to a private merchant company, the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC). The IBEAC sent Captain Lugard (of later Nigerian fame) to establish its authority in the most powerful kingdom of the region, Buganda. Lugard persuaded Kabaka Mwanga to accept British overrule. Mwanga was the leader of a Christian faction at the Baganda royal court. The Muslim Baganda and their Swahili merchant allies

had recently been ousted and had retired to the rival kingdom of Bunyoro. With few government resources at his disposal, Lugard allied himself firmly with Buganda and in particular the Christian aristocracy. He used Baganda levies in a campaign against Bunyoro and their Muslim allies in 1891 and established forts in Toro and Nkore.

The British government formally took over the administration of the territory from the IBEAC in 1894. Kabalega of Bunyoro continued guerrilla warfare against the occupying British forces for a further four years. The British faced mutinies in the mercenary army they had recruited from Sudan and had to import troops from India before they were finally able to overcome resistance in the territory in 1898. Kabalega and Mwanga, who had recently fallen out with the British, were deported to the Seychelles. The importance of Baganda support to British overrule was symbolised by their calling the whole territory the Protectorate of 'Uganda'.

Within Kenya, the British government, who took over the territory from the IBEAC in 1895, faced an early rebellion from the coastal Swahili and their neighbours. Known as the 'Mazrui rebellion', it started as a succession dispute within the Mazrui clan, in which a local IBEAC official had intervened against the wishes of the Muslim majority. It soon developed into a general coastal rebellion against British overrule, which the colonisers took nine months to crush. Following this rebellion, the British abandoned their attempts to rule the coastal towns through the local aristocracy; instead, they promoted Zanzibari and Omani Arabs to positions of local power in the Kenyan coastal towns.

Meanwhile, there was little effective resistance to the initial establishment of British authority in the Kenyan interior. The IBEAC had regarded it as little more than a route to Uganda. As in Tanganyika, the Maasai and others had been seriously weakened by the rapid spread in the early 1890s of rinderpest. The Nandi offered a brief challenge to IBEAC trading caravans in 1894, but this was soon defeated. Significantly, from an early date, the IBEAC began to raid the Kikuyu for labour and for food. But the full effects of British rule did not begin to be felt within the country until the building of the Uganda railway and the beginnings of European settlement in the central highlands in the early 1900s.

Somalia

Before the nineteenth century, the clan-based Somali had survived for many hundreds of years on a mixture of camel and goat herding and

international trading. In northern Somalia, they had been active coastal traders since the Greco-Roman period, famous for their exports of frankincense and myrrh. From the eighth to fourteenth centuries, they had expanded south and west, spreading Islam and absorbing Oromo and earlier Bantu-speaking settlers. They turned Mogadishu into the most important northern town of the Swahili coastal trade before the Portuguese intrusion. Nevertheless, Mogadishu remained an important trading city, exporting cinnamon from India to the Red Sea, while the southern Somali interior produced cotton for export until the trade was killed off in the nineteenth century by cheap, slave-grown imports from America. Weakened economically by the late nineteenth century and lacking any centralised form of government, the Somali were able to offer little initial resistance to foreign overrule.

Figure 22.10 The ruins of Zanzibar Palace after bombardment by British forces, as shown in a British magazine, 10 October 1896. On 25 August 1896, Said Khalid assumed the throne of the Sultanate of Zanzibar on the sudden death of his predecessor cousin. Two days later, the British, claiming the right to approve the succession, demanded that he step down. When Khalid refused, a British warship bombarded the royal palace and sank the only Zanzibari warship. Khalid capitulated within 38 minutes, in what is said to be the shortest war in history.

IN THE SMOKING-ROOM

BY HARRY PAINE.

"I saw the other day," said the Eminent Person, "in the *Daily Mail* an account of a meeting of waiters who are anxious to abolish the tipping system. The public's equally anxious, I suppose—but it will never be done."

"Why not?" asked the Ordinary Man.

"It's too old—too inveterate; the roots have struck too deep. It will never be abolished."

"For my part I can't see why a stupid absurdity cannot be abolished merely because it is old as well as stupid. After all, the public is the master of the business. If the public can only be got to understand that it never tips a waiter at all—that it only tips the proprietor—the eleemosynary twopence will go."

"The public can never be got to understand anything," said the Poet pessimistically.

"It's simple enough. The waiter pays the restaurant proprietor for the holy privilege of waiting in his restaurant. This money which goes to the proprietor is taken from the tips given by the public. The system is an indignity to the waiter and an imposition on the public. The only person who profits is the restaurant proprietor, and he does quite well enough without it."

"Don't imagine the way out of it is so easy," said the Journalist. "I have watched that London restaurant proprietor for years, and had faint glimpses of the naughti-

as the public puts up with it, and always has put up with it, the public presumably can do nothing."

"Excellent!" said the Poet; "a fine, generous, impassioned enthusiasm. It shows where your heart is."

"I do not complain of the food alone. I complain of the supremacy of the restaurant proprietor. Any twopenny-halfpenny Italian confectioner's refreshment-room thinks it has a right to stick up a notice that 'Pipes are not allowed in this saloon,' in order to force the customer to take the proprietor's penny packet of pestilence, call it a cigar, and pay sixpence for it. That sort of thing would be impossible if the proprietor did not know that he was master of the situation."

"This is very gloomy," said the Eminent Person, "and you tell us that there is no hope—that, even if we abolished tips, we should get higher prices and no advantage."

"I don't say that you would get no advantage—you would get the steady civility of a club servant, which is what you want."

"And what would the waiters get?" asked the Ordinary Man.

"They should get thirty shillings a week."

"Thirty shillings!" said the Mere Boy. "The memory of Loiset and Stokes, the agility of the *pulcr tirants*, the temper of Job, the smile of a Venus, the steady civility of a club servant—and all at thirty shillings a week! It's an awful world."



SAID KALID
THE ZANZIBAR PRETENDER



ZANZIBAR PALACE AFTER THE BOMBARDMENT
From a photograph supplied by W. J. Llewellyn

Source: Henry Guttman/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

In the era of the 'scramble', the Somali suffered more division than any other peoples on the continent. In the 1870s, the British encouraged the Egyptian Khedive Isma'il to take control of northern Somalia, thus safeguarding the British route through the Suez Canal to India. The Egyptians pressed into the interior and took the historic inland Muslim city of Harar. When forced by the Mahdist revolt to evacuate Sudan in 1885, however, the Egyptians also withdrew from Somalia. Two years later, Menelik of Ethiopia moved in to take over where the Egyptians had departed. Capturing Harar in 1887, he added the Somali Ogaden to the Ethiopian Empire. The British took the northern coastal region of Somalia as a provisioning colony for their important Yemini refuelling port of Aden on the route to India, while the French claimed the northern coastal enclave that was to become Djibouti. Meanwhile, the Italians, who, with British approval had taken Eritrea following Egyptian withdrawal in 1887, occupied

southern Somalia.

The Horn of Africa in the era of the 'scramble'



From 1895, a Somali religious scholar named Mohammed bin Abdullah Hassan set up an Islamic school in Berbera in British Somaliland where he criticised growing Western and Christian

influences. Moving into the interior, he gathered around him a large following, several thousand strong. In 1899, he declared that he was the Mahdi, the holy one who would expel the infidels from Somalia. The British mounted annual military expeditions against him, but each time, through guerrilla tactics of withdrawal and ambush, Abdullah avoided capture and remained a constant thorn in the side of the British colonial government. In 1909, the British ordered their forces to evacuate the interior and withdraw to the coastal regions. As the apparent conqueror of the British, Abdullah's reputation spread throughout the interior, and he gained a further reprieve during the First World War (1914–18) while the British were occupied elsewhere. In 1920, however, the British renewed their campaign against the man they now called the 'mad mullah'. Assisted by aerial bombardment, they took Abdullah's stronghold of Taleh, although Abdullah himself escaped and lived on in freedom until his death from pneumonia in 1921.



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CHAPTER 23

Industrialisation, colonial conquest and African resistance in south-central and southern Africa

The southern African mineral revolution

The year 1870 was a turning point in southern Africa's history. It ushered in an era of dramatic change prompted by the discovery of first diamonds and then gold in the southern African interior. The industrial mining cities that developed to exploit these valuable minerals transformed the social, economic and political life of the subcontinent. This transformation is known to historians as the southern African 'mineral revolution'. It began with the discovery of huge quantities of diamonds in the region of modern Kimberley in the period 1869–71.

The diamond fields dispute

The diamond fields lay to the north of what was then the British Cape Colony, in territory claimed by the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, as well as by the rulers and representatives of local Griqua, Tswana and Kora residents. Thousands of people, black and white, from all over southern Africa, as well as miners and speculators from Europe, America and Australia, converged on the region. The British were determined to add this valuable territory to their southern African possessions. Ignoring the claims of the local Tlhaping people, a branch of the southern Tswana, the British set up a court of enquiry, which found in favour of the Griqua chief

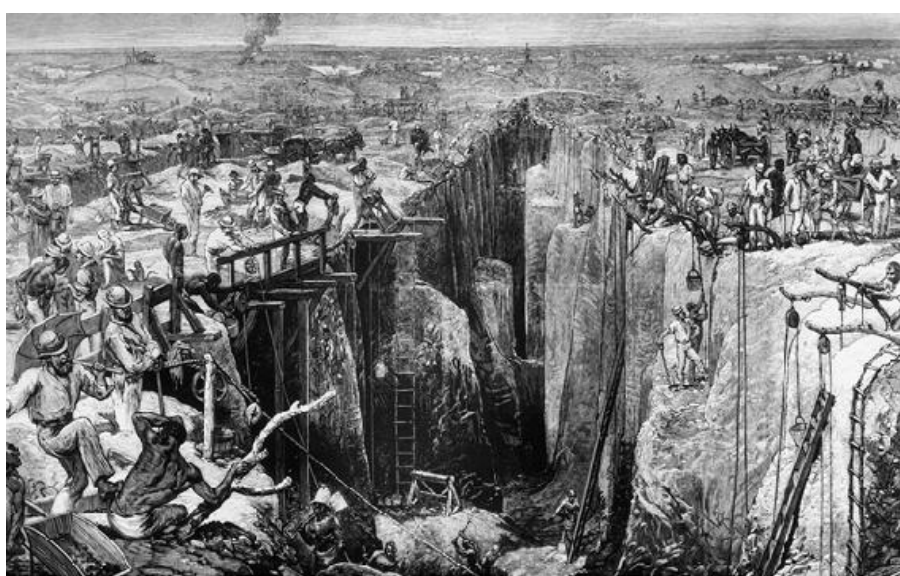
Waterboer. The latter, meanwhile, had been persuaded to ask for British protection from the Boer republics. This provided the British with their justification to promptly annex the territory. Thus, by the end of 1871, what was then the richest known diamond-bearing territory in the world had become the British colony of Griqualand West (see [Map 23.1](#)).



For more background and detail on this subject, see ‘The Diamond Fields Dispute’ on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

From the start, white people dominated the exploitation of the diamond fields. They had the advantages of technology and capital. They also had the important backing of British political power. Initially, the mines were exploited by thousands of individual ‘diggers’, most of them white, but a number of them black. Each digger staked out his own tiny ‘claim’, which he worked with hired black labour. By the late 1870s, the principal diamond mines had become huge open pits using expensive steam-powered machinery to haul earth to the surface and pump out floodwater. Individual claim holders gave way to companies that could raise the capital necessary for such equipment. During the 1880s, one company, De Beers, grew to dominate all the others. It was owned by Cecil Rhodes, an English immigrant who had made an early fortune at the diamond fields in the 1870s. By 1889, De Beers had bought out all its rivals and established a complete monopoly of diamond mining at Kimberley ([Figure 23.1](#)).

Figure 23.1 The diamond mines at Kimberley. Early labour relations in industrialising South Africa are revealed in the left foreground. Wood engraving in *The Illustrated London News*, Supplement, 31 August 1872.



Source: Fotosearch/Getty Images.

Under the De Beers monopoly, the role of Africans at the diamond fields was confined to that of manual labourer. De Beers used its monopoly to keep down wages. Those seeking work had to accept six-month contracts at lower wages than before and live confined in fenced compounds, separated from their families and deprived of the opportunity to find alternative income. This system persisted, little changed, in South Africa for the next 100 years.

Social and economic impact of the mineral revolution

The sudden rise of a city of 30,000 people in the southern African interior had important consequences for the people of the region. First, Kimberley provided a ready market for agricultural produce. Farmers from all over the region, black as well as white, responded eagerly to the new opportunities, and although many prospered in the short term, ultimately it led to greater competition for the best agricultural land. In the Boer republics, white landowners made new demands on their tenants' labour, and throughout the region, the 1870s and early 80s saw a revival of old conflicts over land.

The second major impact of the diamond fields was the development of migrant labour. The mines of Kimberley in the 1870s employed up to 50,000 black workers in a year. They came from the British colonies of the Cape and Natal, the Boer republics and from the African kingdoms beyond. The wages, although low by today's standards, were higher than could be got anywhere else in southern Africa at the time. The price of a gun could be earned within a month.

It was this that attracted so many Africans to make the long trek on foot to Kimberley; the chance to return home with the guns to defend their territory from further white encroachment.

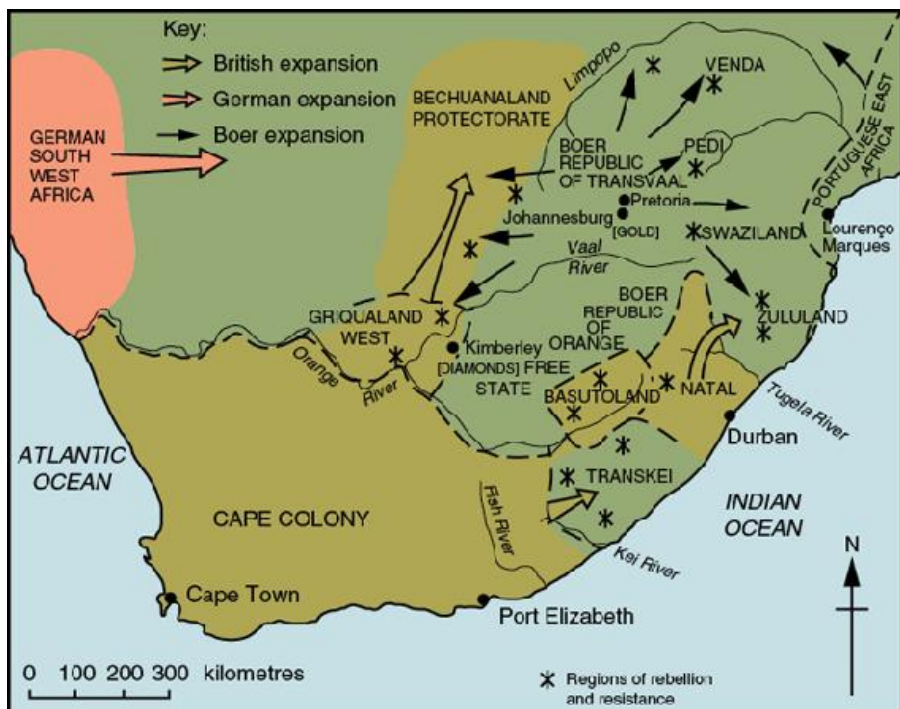
Kimberley brought many into contact for the first time with a cash economy, whether they were farmers selling their crops, woodcutters selling fuel or individuals selling their labour. They returned home with cash, wagons, guns or imported cloth and cheap manufactured metal goods from Europe. The latter tolled the death knell for the independent Iron Age of the southern African interior.

The political impact of the mineral revolution

One of the most important consequences of the mineral revolution was the increasing level of conflict between black and white, which came to characterise the region in the 1870s and 80s. It ushered in a new era of aggressive white colonialism, which extended white control and settlement over much of the remaining independent, African-ruled territory of the region. At the same time, Africans were better armed and often better organised for resistance than they had been in previous conflicts with white colonists. The first signs of this were in a war between Pedi and Boers in the eastern Transvaal in 1876. The Pedi drove invading Boers back from their mountain stronghold in a conflict that nearly bankrupted the government of the Boer republic.

The driving force in the revival of colonial ambition in the 1870s was the British. They hoped to amalgamate the white-controlled states of southern Africa into a new, British-dominated federation, the prosperity of which would be guaranteed by the wealth of the diamond fields. An essential part of the plan was the destruction of the remaining independent African kingdoms of the region, in particular the Zulu, the Xhosa and the Pedi. This would provide security for further white settlement and also turn armies of African soldiers into labourers on white-owned farms and mines. Although there was little local white enthusiasm for the planned federation, ultimately it was African resistance that defeated British schemes.

Southern Africa in the era of the 'scramble'



In the ninth and final war with the Xhosa beyond the Cape's eastern borders (1877–8), the British faced unexpectedly tough opposition. By the time it was finally over, the strength of Xhosa resistance had decided local colonial authorities against seizing any more Xhosa land for white settlement. The Xhosa were thus left with a substantial 'reserve' of land east of the River Kei.

In January 1879, the British confronted their principal African opponents, the Zulu. A large British army advanced in three columns into the heart of the Zulu kingdom. Cetshwayo, who had ruled the kingdom since 1872, launched the full weight of his army against the central British column and overran it at the Battle of Isandhlwana. This Zulu victory, more than any other single event, eclipsed British plans for federation. It took the British an eight-month campaign and thousands of reinforcements before they defeated the Zulu army and captured Cetshwayo. Subsequent British attempts to weaken Zulu unity by dividing Cetshwayo's kingdom into a number of artificial chiefdoms ultimately succeeded. Factional disputes between supporters and opponents of the British plan led to civil war and the disintegration of the kingdom in the 1880s. In 1887, a devastated and famine-struck Zululand became a British colony.

In the meantime, the British had annexed the bankrupt republic of the Transvaal in 1877 and, with Swazi help, had finally defeated the Pedi in 1879. In 1877, the Boers of the Transvaal had been too

weakened by the Pedi war to resist the British action, but they greatly resented their loss of independence. By 1880, they no longer needed British protection from Pedi or from Zulu, and they began to resent the burden of British taxation, too. In 1880–1, the Boers rose in rebellion against the British in the Transvaal. British schemes for federation had already been abandoned, so after the Boers had scored some early military victories, the British agreed to withdraw from the Transvaal and return it to Boer authority.

The gold mining revolution and its consequences

In 1886, the southern African mineral revolution entered an entirely new phase with the discovery of huge quantities of gold at the Witwatersrand ('ridge of white waters'), an east–west ridge of hills in the central Transvaal, 40 kilometres south of the Boer capital Pretoria. The massive industrial development that followed the founding of Johannesburg on this site in 1886 dwarfed even the diamond revolution of Kimberley. Within a few years, the gold mining city of Johannesburg had grown from a few tents on the veld to being the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa. Almost overnight, the economic centre of southern Africa shifted from Kimberley and the British colonies to the heartland of the Boer republic.

The social and economic effects of the industrialisation of the Witwatersrand (sometimes known simply as 'the Rand', from which modern South Africa takes the name of its currency) were similar to those observed for Kimberley although on a far larger scale. Mining capitalists from Kimberley and bankers from Europe quickly bought up gold mining claims and formed them into companies. It soon became clear that the bulk of the gold-bearing ore lay deep within the ground and the long-term future lay in deep-level mining (see [Figure 23.2](#)). This required huge quantities of capital investment and, by the early 1890s, gold mining on the Witwatersrand had become dominated by a handful of powerful companies, among them Cecil Rhodes's Consolidated Gold Fields.

Labour recruiting agents drew migrant workers to Johannesburg from all over the subcontinent. The development of regular labour migration to the Rand was helped by further white seizure of African land in the 1880s and 90s, which drove dispossessed rural Africans to the urban centres in search of a livelihood. At the same time, the rapid growth of Johannesburg as a market for agricultural produce was a great source of new wealth for the rural Boers of the Transvaal. African tenants on the white-owned farms were forced into tougher tenancy agreements. This meant they provided more and more free

labour to the Boer landowners in return for the right to remain on what had originally been their own land.

Figure 23.2 Workers pose for a photograph in a deep-level gold mine, Johannesburg, South Africa, late nineteenth century.



Source: *Buyenlarge/Getty Images*.

Although not many Boers were directly involved in the gold mining process, the government of the Transvaal profited enormously from the new industrial developments. They taxed the mining industry hard, and charged heavy import duties on essential mining equipment. The Transvaal government, previously bankrupted by the Pedi war of 1876, was now able to afford the powerful regular army that was needed to continue the Boer conquest of the northern highveld region. Punitive military expeditions were sent out east, west and north in the 1880s and 90s against those African chiefdoms that still defied Boer authority. By 1898, the Transvaal Boers had reconquered the Soutpansberg from the Venda and so made good their claims to all the territory south of the Limpopo River (see [Map 23.1](#)).

In the British sphere, the last resistance of the century came from the southern Tswana following the outbreak of rinderpest, which threatened to decimate the remnants of their economic independence.

White settler colonists, eager for further African land, did not wait for rebellion, rather, they actively sought it out, driving those who resisted into the remote Langeberg Range of mountains, near the southern edge of the Kalahari Desert. After a six-month siege, the defenders were defeated by starvation and a fresh 2,000-strong colonial force. Their heroic leader, Kgosi Luka Jantjie, died in the final shootout. His body was mutilated for colonial souvenirs, while his people were 'ethnically cleansed' from the region, their land confiscated for sale to white settlers and the several thousand survivors transported to the southwestern Cape to serve as indentured labourers.

The British 'scramble' for south-central Africa

The annexation of Bechuanaland

In 1884, the Germans had declared a protectorate over 'South West Africa' (Namibia) as part of their initiative in the wider 'Scramble for Africa' (see [Chapter 22](#)). The British responded by annexing 'Bechuanaland' – the Kalahari and Tswana territory north of the Cape Colony (see [Map 23.2](#)). Various Tswana leaders had for years requested some form of British protection from increasing Boer encroachment on their narrow strip of fertile land between Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert. But the British declaration of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885 was in their own interests rather than that of the Tswana concerned. It was mainly to prevent the possibility of a German link-up with the Transvaal Boers across the strategically important 'road to the north'. This was the trade and labour route to and from the northern interior, which was so important to the continuing prosperity of Kimberley and the Cape Colony. The annexation of Bechuanaland also ensured that future British colonists would not be deprived of access to the possible mineral wealth of the central African interior. Within a few years, the mining magnate Cecil Rhodes had devised a scheme to exploit this opportunity.

The colonisation of Zimbabwe

Rhodes and his investors had heard of the ancient gold mines of the Rozvi and Mutapa Empires. They believed that a private British company using modern mining techniques could turn the Zimbabwe

plateau into a 'second Rand', one not subject to the restrictive taxation policies of a Boer republic. The main opposition to such a scheme was the Kingdom of Ndebele, which dominated the western half of the Zimbabwe plateau. In 1888, Lobengula, the Ndebele king, who had succeeded Mzilikazi in 1870, was tricked into signing away his kingdom to one of Rhodes's agents. Lobengula believed that he was allowing a mere handful of prospectors to enter his country. But the concession he signed was deliberately mistranslated by Reverend Helm, the resident British missionary (see the end of [Chapter 18](#)). In practice, it gave Rhodes's agents a free hand to take 'whatever action they consider necessary' to exploit the minerals of the kingdom. Despite Lobengula's vigorous protests, the British government accepted the fraudulent concession and approved the colonisation of Zimbabwe by Rhodes's newly formed British South Africa Company (BSAC).

In 1890, Rhodes sent in a heavily armed 'pioneer column', which skirted the south of the Ndebele Kingdom and occupied Mashonaland on the eastern plateau (see [Map 23.2](#)). The 'pioneers' then dispersed to stake out farms for themselves and exploit the abandoned gold mines of the former Mutapa Empire. They soon discovered, however, that the ancient Shona miners had been more thorough than they had supposed and there were very few exploitable mines left. In their desperate search for valuable gold artefacts, these early white colonists vandalised and looted many ancient historical sites, including Great Zimbabwe, destroying hundreds of years' worth of irreplaceable archaeological evidence.

Meanwhile, at his capital in Bulawayo, Lobengula tried every available diplomatic tactic to ward off the attack that he felt certain was inevitable. When it came in 1893, the BSAC's advantage of mounted troops and Maxim machine guns was clearly evident. Within a matter of days, Bulawayo fell to the invading column. The subsequent death of Lobengula threw the Ndebele into disarray. The BSAC, considering it had won, confiscated all Ndebele cattle and carved up the country into white-owned farms. From this time, the white settlers began calling their newly acquired colony 'Rhodesia', in honour of their founder. In 1896–7, however, both Ndebele and Shona rose against the oppression of their conquerors. With the encouragement and leadership of religious spirit mediums, they nearly expelled the white colonists from their country. But Rhodes was able to call on reinforcements from the Cape, and Ndebele and Shona resistance was eventually overcome. Nevertheless, their struggle for freedom in the 1890s was an important inspiration for a later generation who fought for their country's independence in the 1970s

(see Chapter 29).

South-central Africa in the era of the 'scramble'

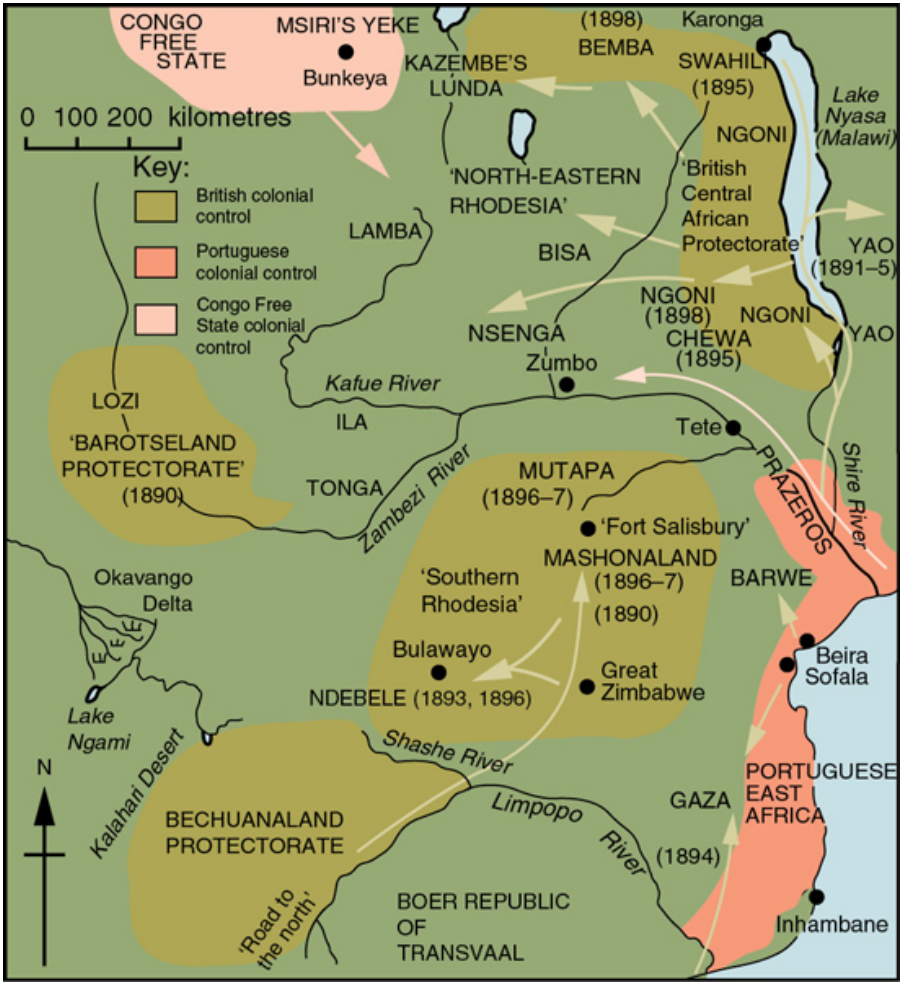


Figure 23.3 Rhodes straddling the continent, in a *Punch* cartoon, 1892. He holds a telegraph wire in his hands. This was as far as he got in his ultimate ambition to build a railway through 'British Africa', from the Cape to Cairo.



THE RHODES COLOSSUS
STRIDING FROM CAPE TOWN TO CAIRO.

Source: © Punch Limited, Reproduced with permission.

Lewanika, Barotseland and the BSAC

After the old Lozi aristocracy had ousted the Kololo in 1864, the Lozi court suffered a lengthy period of dynastic dispute and palace revolutions. It was not until 1885 that the victorious contestant, Lubosi, emerged in final control of the kingdom. He assumed the title, Lewanika, meaning 'conqueror'.

In 1889, Lewanika sought a British protectorate for his kingdom, known to the British as 'Barotseland' (see [Map 23.2](#)). He was encouraged by the example of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. There, the British offered the Tswana protection from Boer aggression without, as yet, interfering in any way with internal Tswana affairs. Lewanika sought protection from the constant threat of Ndebele raids, and he believed that a British resident commissioner or ambassador at his court would strengthen his personal position over any potential rivals to the throne. He also wanted British aid in setting up schools to teach his people literacy and technical skills. In 1890, Lochner, Rhodes's agent, promised all of this plus £2,000 a year in return for a concession to exploit the minerals in the kingdom. Believing that he was dealing with an agent of the British government rather than a private company, Lewanika signed the concession. But he was soon disillusioned. Although Ndebele power was ultimately crushed by the British South Africa Company, it was not before another Ndebele raid on Barotseland in 1893. It was 1897 before the BSAC paid Lewanika any money or sent even a temporary resident. And no industrial schools were ever financed by the BSAC. Nevertheless, Barotseland was one of the few parts of south-central Africa to which colonisation came peaceably, and very little Lozi land was lost to white settlement.

The Central African Protectorate and North-Eastern Rhodesia

In 1889, the British government proclaimed the Central African Protectorate (see [Map 23.2](#)) over the region, which eight years later they renamed Nyasaland (*nyasa* being a local African word for 'lake', giving the British colonial names 'Lake Nyasa' and 'Nyasaland', changed since independence to 'Malawi'). The British government's action had been prompted by Portuguese attempts to deprive British traders access to Lake Nyasa and the Shire valley region. Harry Johnston, a friend and associate of Cecil Rhodes, was appointed administrator.

Figure 23.4 Litunga Lewanika II (1878–84, 1885–1916) meeting British officials at Lealui, the Lozi capital, October 1897. Major Robert Coryndon of the BSAC (and soon to be the first resident commissioner of 'North-Western Rhodesia') is seated centre; Lewanika is seated to his right with hat and fly-whisk, with his eldest son and successor, Litia, later King Yeta III (1916–45), seated to his right.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Johnston's administration faced determined African resistance and for most of the 1890s he was engaged in military action, first against Yao (1891–5), then Swahili (1895), Chewa (1895) and Ngoni (1895–9) (see [Map 23.2](#)). Most of Johnston's wars were ostensibly fought in the name of 'the suppression of the slave trade', and to this end he received the keen support of the Shire valley Nyanga, who for years had suffered from the raids of Yao slavers. But, in reality, Johnston's wars in the Central African Protectorate were a crude military conquest of the principal African authorities in the territory. He confronted each ruler in turn with a treaty of submission for him to sign and a demand for taxation. Those who rejected this interpretation of 'protection' faced conquest, death and taxation of the survivors. A senior British government official of the time aptly likened Johnston's demands to those of a highway robber: 'Treaty or compulsion; your money or your life!' Ultimately, it was Maxim guns, artillery, gunboats on the lake and a hardened professional corps of 300 Sikhs from India that finally ensured British control of the territory. A number of defeated Malawian resistance leaders committed suicide rather than submit to British captivity.

Johnston also acted as an agent of Rhodes' BSAC in the neighbouring territory of 'North-Eastern Rhodesia' (see [Map 23.2](#)). Rhodes supplied Johnston with a £10,000 'pacification subsidy' for his work in Nyasaland. In return, Johnston supported Rhodes's interests by despatching treaty-making agents into the eastern and central districts of modern Zambia. The main resistance to BSAC rule in the

region came from Bemba and Ngoni. In their conflicts with these, Rhodes's agents were able to call on the military support of British government forces in Nyasaland.

In initial battles with the British, the well-armed Bemba had been able to hold their own. But the wealth and authority of the principal Bemba chiefs was gradually undermined. This was partly caused by British and German conquests in Nyasaland and Tanganyika, which were disrupting the long-distance trading caravans on which the Bemba used to prey. They were further weakened by a leadership crisis within the Bemba hierarchy. Finally, in the confusion that followed the death of one claimant to the paramountcy in 1898, a French Catholic missionary declared himself king and welcomed BSAC's forces into the Bemba capital.

Meanwhile, in the southeast, the techniques that had ensured the Ngoni two generations of military superiority in south-central Africa proved no match for the ruthless British use of Maxim guns. In military confrontations in 1898, British machine guns mowed down thousands of Ngoni soldiers. In launching their attack from neighbouring Nyasaland, the British claimed to be ridding the district of a tyrannical raiding state. Yet they themselves seized large tracts of land for white settlement in the region and forced surviving Ngoni into wage labour by confiscating all their cattle and demanding taxation. North-Eastern Rhodesia became a British protectorate in 1900.

Wars of conquest and resistance in Mozambique

Resistance to Portuguese authority in Mozambique was particularly widespread and prolonged. The Portuguese faced opposition from the Gaza Empire in the south, the Barwe kingdom in the foothills of the Zambezi escarpment, and the huge *prazos* of the Zambezi valley with their local Tonga, Manganja and Chewa allies. In the northern territory, resistance was led by Yao, Makonde and Makua – many of them well armed through years of trading in ivory and slaves with coastal merchants. Those in longest contact with European and Goan (Indian) traders tended to offer the toughest resistance to Portuguese demands for taxation in the 1880s and 90s. They had the arms and were used to defying the attempts of local Portuguese officials to assert their authority. This was particularly true of the *prazos* (estates) of the Zambezi valley, some of whose stockaded towns were defended with artillery.

The largest single state, the Gaza Empire, was already in decline by the 1880s. One reason for this was the expansion of the Gorongozo *prazo*, which partly induced the Gaza ruler Ngungunyane to shift his capital further south in 1889. More fundamentally, however, the authority of the Gaza *indunas* (councillors) was being undermined by the development of migrant labour to Kimberley, Johannesburg and Natal. This removed large numbers of potential soldiers, herdsmen and hunters from the territory. Also, young men who earned wages outside Gaza state no longer depended on their elders to supply them with *lobola* (dowry) for their brides.

Anticipating the Portuguese threat, Ngungunyane sought an alliance with the British, but his appeals were ignored. In 1891, an Anglo-Portuguese treaty placed most of the Gaza Empire firmly within the Portuguese sphere. It was one of those deals so typical of the wider European 'scramble', in which European governments drew the colonial boundaries of the continent without regard to African interests or requests. In 1894, Gaza took the offensive and raided the Portuguese port of Lourenço Marques (modern Maputo). But the Portuguese response was more than the weakened Gaza state could bear. In two decisive battles, Gaza's armies were defeated and Ngungunyane was captured.

In this instance, it was primarily a Portuguese army of conquest, utilising the Maxim gun to best advantage. In most of the rest of Mozambique, the Portuguese were heavily dependent on local African armies for their conquests. In fact, it has been described not so much as a 'Portuguese' conquest, but rather a series of African interstate or 'civil' wars, exploited and directed by Portuguese officers. In the early 1880s, it was the *prazeros* who extended Portuguese authority up the Zambezi valley and re-established a Portuguese trading post at Zumbo. In the late 1880s, the Portuguese exploited ancient rivalries to turn the *prazeros* against each other, using a 12,000-strong *prazo* army against a rival *prazo*. And, in 1901, the Portuguese used 6,000 Ngoni mercenaries against a *prazo* north of Tete. In northern Mozambique, where resistance lasted longest, the Yao were only finally overcome when the ban on arms sales to Africans was enforced in 1912.

Figure 23.5 The trading station at Tete on the Zambezi, early 1900s. Founded as a Swahili trading village in the days of the Mutapa Empire, it was seized by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and remains an important crossing point of the Zambezi in modern times.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

In most cases, African mercenaries, as conscripts and allies of the Portuguese, saw themselves as exploiting a local advantage, settling ancient interstate rivalries or seizing opportunities for loot. The Portuguese had been around for centuries; they were only one local power among many. Their authority could usually be defied in the end. There was no particular reason to suggest that this time the Portuguese would eventually come to dominate the whole region.

Conquest and resistance in Namibia

In central Namibia, between the Namib Desert in the west and the Kalahari Desert in the east, lies the dry grassland region of the central plateau. Although too dry for regular cultivation, for the peoples of Namibia it remained an essential resource for herding cattle, sheep and goats, and for hunting. Much of the nineteenth-century history of this region was dominated by intense conflict between Nama and Herero pastoralists and hunter/traders. By mid-century, the region had been penetrated by British traders and German missionaries. Both Nama and Herero competed for the trade, exporting cattle, ivory and ostrich feathers in exchange for guns and ammunition.

In 1884, the Germans declared a protectorate over the coastal region from the Orange to the Kunene Rivers, that is, from the Cape Colony to Angola (see [Map 23.3](#)). It was part of a deliberate new

German policy to stake out colonies in Africa. On the face of it, they claimed to be protecting the interests of German missionaries and traders, in particular a German merchant named Adolf Luderitz who had set up a trading post at Angra Pequena in 1883. Luderitz claimed to have 'bought' huge tracts of coastal territory from local Nama chiefs in exchange for guns, alcohol and paltry sums of cash.

When the Germans moved on to the central plateau in 1890, they were able to exploit the age-old rivalry that existed between Nama and Herero. They offered the Herero a treaty of protection and in return proposed to help them in their long-term territorial conflict with the Nama. Hendrik Witbooi, the Nama leader, understood the implications of the German threat only too well. He wrote to Maherero, the Herero chief, warning him of the reality of his new alliance:

You think you will retain your independent Chieftainship after I have been destroyed ... but my dear Kaptein you will eternally regret your action in having handed over to the White man the right to govern your country. After all our war is not as serious as you think ... But this thing you have done, to surrender yourself to the Government of the White man, will be a burden that you will carry on your shoulders. You call yourself Supreme Chief, but when you are under another's control you are merely a subordinate Chief.¹

The German commander set up a military base at Windhoek and launched an attack on Witbooi's home town of Gibeon (see [Map 23.3](#)). But Witbooi withdrew his troops from Gibeon and waged a successful guerrilla campaign against the German supply lines. For months, the Germans were penned in at Windhoek until the arrival of heavy reinforcements from overseas in 1894. Although the Nama were then militarily defeated, the Germans were obliged to allow them to keep their weapons.

The position of the Herero, meanwhile, had been weakened by the death of Maherero and the succession dispute that followed. The Germans proved the truth of Witbooi's warning and took advantage of the situation. They set up a military garrison at the Herero capital, Okahandja, and declared their recognition of Samuel Maherero as Herero chief. They then ignored the new chief's authority and started allocating vast tracts of land for white settlement in the Windhoek area. This included much of the best grazing land in the central plateau region. When the eastern Herero and Mbanderu resisted German tax and labour demands in 1896, their 'rebellion' was

crushed, their leaders executed and more land was seized for white settlement.

German conquest of 'South West Africa'



By the turn of the century, the Germans had extended their control over most of the territory of 'South West Africa', apart from Ovamboland in the extreme north. The spread of rinderpest in 1896–7 crippled the pastoral economies of Nama and Herero and eased the rapid spread of German settlement in the aftermath of the disease. German attempts to turn the whole territory into a colony of white settlement, however, were to provoke one of the great wars of African resistance between 1904 and 1907 (see [Chapter 24](#)).

The South African War, 1899–1902

We saw earlier in this chapter that the development of gold mining on the Rand brought a great deal of wealth to the Boers of the Transvaal. Most of the actual mining remained in the hands of *uitlanders* (European ‘outsiders’), mostly British, who had the expertise and capital to develop deep-level mining. Paul Kruger, Transvaal president, pursued a deliberate policy of heavily taxing the mining industry in order to benefit his political supporters, the rural Boers (now beginning to refer to themselves as ‘Afrikaners’). Kruger also ensured that vital supporting industries, such as the manufacture of dynamite for blasting rock, the supply of water to Johannesburg and the building of railways, all remained in the hands of Afrikaner monopolies. These charged the *uitlanders* high prices for their products and services. The policies of Kruger’s government thus imposed a heavy cost on the British-dominated mining industry. At the same time, the *uitlanders* were denied political rights. This was because there were so many of them that if they were allowed to vote, they might outnumber the Afrikaners themselves and so take over control of the state.

In 1895, Rhodes, who was then prime minister of the Cape Colony (1890–6), hatched a plot to overthrow the Transvaal government by force. He hoped to raise the *uitlanders* of Johannesburg in rebellion and send in the BSAC police from ‘Rhodesia’ to support them. But the uprising failed and the raiding force, led by Jameson, was captured and its leaders imprisoned. The Jameson raid provoked great anti-British feeling in the Afrikaner republics and among Afrikaners in the Cape Colony. Rhodes was forced to resign from office and the Transvaal and Orange Free State formed a military alliance against any further British threat to their independence.

Where Rhodes and private capitalists had failed, the British government now directly intervened. There was a very real danger that the Transvaal would form an anti-British alliance with Germany. And Britain was determined that the gold mines of the Rand should not fall into rival European hands. Between 1896 and 1899, tension mounted as the British demanded Kruger introduce reforms that would favour the British-dominated mining industry. In particular, they demanded that the *uitlanders* be allowed full political rights. To back up their demands, the British moved troops up to the Transvaal’s borders. Kruger, realising war was inevitable, decided to strike first. He declared war in October 1899 and Afrikaner commandos stormed across the republics’ borders into the British colonies of the Cape and Natal.

The British suffered some initial humiliating defeats but they imported an army of up to half a million troops and by mid-1900 they had captured the principal Afrikaner cities. Kruger fled into exile in Europe, but his commando leaders continued a guerrilla campaign for a further two years. They were eventually forced into surrender only after the British implemented a devastating ‘scorched-earth’ policy. Afrikaner farms were burnt and their families imprisoned in appalling ‘concentration camps’, where thousands of women and children died from disease. It was a legacy that the Afrikaners would not easily forget. The harsh treatment meted out to Afrikaner women and children during the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War was a strong stimulus for the development of Afrikaner nationalism during the early decades of the twentieth century.

The South African War, 1899–1902

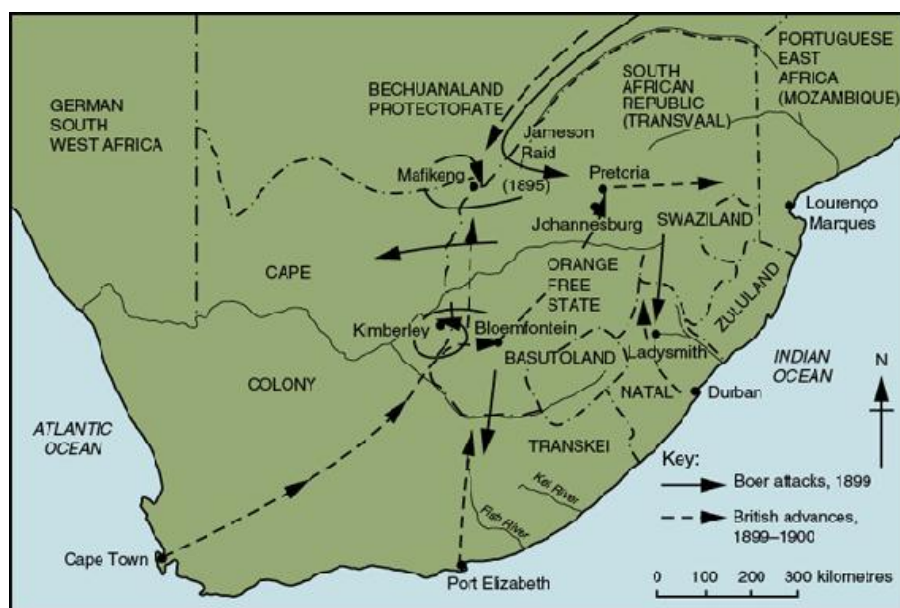


Figure 23.6 An Afrikaner commando on a bushbuck hunt during a lull in the fighting of the South African War, 1899–1902.



Source: Popperfoto/Getty Images.

During the war, both sides had officially taken the view that it was 'a white man's war' and Africans should not be involved. Basically, the war was about who should dominate South Africa, the British or the Afrikaners. It was feared that if Africans were armed and encouraged to shoot white people of either side, then after the war they would no longer resume the subordinate position that both sides intended they should take. In practice, however, Africans were very much involved in the war, as victims and participants. They too suffered from the scorched-earth tactics and thousands likewise died in concentration camps. They were employed as support personnel to British armies and Afrikaner commandos, serving as labourers, wagon drivers, scouts and messengers. They also grew much of the food that supplied both armies. Some took up arms, in particular in support of the British cause. It was believed by many Africans that this support would be rewarded by the British: a belief the British did nothing to dispel. They occupied deserted Afrikaner farms and expected that the British would confirm their ownership of this land, much of it seized from them by the Afrikaners in an earlier generation. They also believed that a British victory would ensure for black people generally a more equal share in the political and economic life of the region.

This trust and expectation, however, were sadly misplaced. After the war, the British were mainly concerned to placate their Afrikaner opponents, and to establish unity and understanding between 'Boer and Briton'. In 1910, the former Afrikaner republics and British colonies were joined into a single 'Union of South Africa'. A principal purpose of this was to ensure the security and continuation of white

domination in South Africa.



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SECTION 9



THE IMPACT AND NATURE OF COLONIAL RULE, 1890–1945



A theme that emerges from the early decades of colonial rule is the demographic impact of colonisation. There was an overall decline in the population of tropical Africa between the 1890s and 1920s. This was most pronounced in French Equatorial Africa and the Belgian Congo where the population declined by 20–50 per cent. A variety of factors accounted for this demographic shift. Aside from the more obvious factors – wars of colonial conquest and rebellion, the rapacious pursuit of wild rubber in the Congo Basin, and the First World War campaign in eastern Africa – there was the impact of disease.

Fear of disease was one of the official reasons for the segregation of poor quality and overcrowded African ‘townships’ from spacious European suburbia. The prejudices of class and culture also lay behind this segregation, although basic racial prejudice was probably the overarching motivation. Racist segregation was practised throughout colonial Africa, its most extreme form being found in the most heavily colonised country: South Africa.

Alongside displacement and disease, there was an active colonial denigration of indigenous medical practices, which were invariably condemned as superstition and ‘witchcraft’. Furthermore, in

precolonial times, Africans had known severe hunger in adverse climatic conditions, which may have prompted migration; however, large-scale famine – as experienced in northern Uganda, South Sudan, northern Angola and Malawi – was a new phenomenon and a feature of early colonial rule.

Migrant labour, encouraged to meet the demands of the colonial economy, systematically drained rural areas of their male workforce. Women may thus have gained some level of social empowerment, but the overall effect was a social and economic weakening of rural society at a time when the vast majority of Africa's population was still rurally based. Migrant labour and cash taxation was part of a deliberate policy of forcing Africans into a cash economy on terms set by colonial employers. This undermined economic self-sufficiency and led to a dramatic increase in rural poverty. Indeed, it can be argued that the roots of modern Africa's persistent rural and peri-urban poverty can be traced to the first generation of colonial rule.

Even in the earliest period of colonial rule, however, African initiative can be traced in shaping certain aspects of the economy in their own favour, as shown in their insistence on growing groundnuts in northern Nigeria instead of the cotton preferred by colonial investors.

The 1920s and 30s may, at the time, have been perceived as the period when colonial control was firmly established across the continent. But it was also the period that germinated the seeds of colonial downfall. Colonial authorities were forced to recognise that they needed African collaboration if they were to maintain their rule. But the distorted forms of 'traditional rule' they used to achieve this undermined precolonial forms of authority. This handed the critique of colonialism to a new class of educated Africans who were generally outside indigenous authority structures.

By at least the 1920s, Africans had recovered from the grave psychological shock of imperial conquest and, wherever they could, they began to seize the initiative in challenging colonial rule. Africans pushed the boundaries of available education, mostly provided by missionaries with limited aspirations. A small but significant number went overseas for further education, in the colonial capitals of Europe and the African American institutions of the USA. During the interwar years, the primary focus of educated Africans was to reform an exploitative and prejudiced system and challenge the colonial assumption of a European monopoly of power. By the time of the Second World War, however, and especially following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia of 1935–6, educated Africans turned their sights to political independence. Africans who had served the war effort, either as fighting troops or as food and

commodity producers back home, refused to resubmit to the colonial yoke after 1945. The ground was laid for political independence.

CHAPTER 24

Consolidation of empire: the early period of colonial rule

Raw materials and markets

We saw in [Chapter 21](#) that the prime economic and financial reasons for the European quest for empire in Africa were the need for new investment opportunities for financial capital, new markets for manufactured goods, and the search for raw materials for European industry. In theory, the three should have gone hand in hand, and at times they did. Africans themselves produced the raw materials and sold them for cash, much of which they spent on imported manufactured goods. Too often, however, European governments, merchants and colonists abused the power that went with recent conquest and looked to their own short-term gain. Land was seized and raw materials extracted from the continent with little or nothing given in exchange.

Concessionary companies

In many parts of Africa, the new financial investments went into concessionary companies that European governments used to colonise their newfound empires. By this system, private European companies were granted vast stretches of African territory to exploit and colonise at their own expense in the name of the European country concerned. It was an attempt by Europe to colonise ‘on the cheap’. We have already seen that the British used the system in Nigeria (the Royal

Niger Company), in 'Rhodesia' (the British South Africa Company) and east Africa (the Imperial British East Africa Company).

Concessionary companies were also widely used in the early exploitation of German, French and Portuguese colonies. In theory, the company would 'open up' the territory, set up a rudimentary administration, invest in railways and introduce Africans to a cash economy. This would, in due course, build up markets for European manufactured goods. But, in practice, the system was widely open to abuse, mainly because it was motivated purely by short-term private profit. There was little long-term investment in administration, roads or railways. Instead, the companies concentrated on the violent exploitation of the people and their natural resources.

Persistent African resistance, however, ensured that early high profit levels could not be sustained and many companies went bankrupt. In most of the continent, apart from Mozambique, administration by concessionary company had given way to direct European imperial control by the early 1920s. The worst abuses of the system were observed in the Congo River basin, that is, in the Congo Free State and French Equatorial Africa.

The Congo Free State

King Leopold II of Belgium had declared that all land not actively occupied and cultivated by its inhabitants was 'vacant land' and as such belonged to him and his Congo Free State government. In the sparsely populated forest, where hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation were predominant, this meant the bulk of the land in the territory. Some of this 'vacant' land Leopold kept for himself, the rest he leased to private concessionary companies. One Belgian company, for example, was granted 8,000 square kilometres of land in return for building a railway from the coast to Malebo Pool. Another, the Katanga Company, got one-third of the 'vacant land' and exclusive mineral rights in the southeastern quarter of the state. In return, the Free State government was to get one-third of the company's profits.

Figure 24.1 The lifestyle to which early colonial administrators aspired. A postmaster/tax collector in 'Nyasaland' (Malawi) in 1891 being carried in a *machila*, with game trophies at his side.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The main object of concessionary exploitation in the tropical forests from the 1890s to the early 1900s was wild rubber. The spread of the bicycle and motor car in Europe and North America stimulated a boom in the world market for rubber, which only subsided with the development of plantations in Southeast Asia between 1905 and 1910. Company agents took their private armies of African ex-slaves into the Congo Basin and forced the local people to collect rubber from the forest. In a report published in *The Times*, 18 November 1895, an American missionary working in the Congo, Reverend J.B. Murphy, described the barbarity of the system he had witnessed:

It has reduced the people to a state of utter despair. Each town in the district is forced to bring a certain quantity [of rubber] to the headquarters of the commissaire every Sunday ... The soldiers drive the people into the bush. If they will not go they are shot down, and their left hands cut off and taken as trophies to the commissaire ... These hands, the hands of men, women and children, are placed in rows before the commissaire, who counts them to see that the soldiers have not wasted the cartridges. The commissaire is paid a commission of about 1d. a pound upon all the rubber he gets. It is therefore to his interest to get as much as he can ...

Let me give an incident to show how this unrighteous trade affects the people. One day a State corporal, who was in charge of the post of Lolifa, was going round the town collecting rubber. Meeting a poor woman whose husband was away fishing, he said, 'Where is your husband?' ... He then said, 'Where is his rubber?' She

answered, 'It is ready for you,' whereupon he said, 'You lie,' and ... shot her dead. Shortly afterwards the husband returned, and was told of the murder of his wife. ... The wretched man then raised his gun and killed the corporal. The soldiers ran away to the headquarters of the State and made misrepresentations of the case, with the result that the commissaire sent a large force to support the authority of the soldiers; the town was looted, burned, and many people killed and wounded. In November last [1894] there was heavy fighting upon the Bosira, because the people refused to give rubber, and I was told upon the authority of a State officer that no fewer than 1,890 people were killed.

These and other incidents like them were brought to public attention in Europe, but little was done about it for a further decade. In the meantime, Africans resisted the crude and brutal exploitation as well as they were able. Desertion of their villages was the most readily available form of resistance, although this, in turn, resulted in great hardship, as Reverend Murphy went on to explain:

Two of the most flourishing towns in Mr H.M. Stanley's time, Kintamo and Kinchassa – are now no more, and the people have gone over to the French Congo. ... Many people have left the main river and gone into the interior in order to escape the arbitrary demands of the State ... The people did not run away without great provocation, for it meant starvation to them, all the gardens and their homes being upon the State side. Even then the State could not leave them in peace; they heard that they came over at night to their old homes to get food, and they stationed canoes and lay in wait for them, with orders that the soldiers should shoot as many as they caught, and to my knowledge they shot seven people in one night.

Increasingly, people resorted to armed resistance. Those in the lower Congo region obtained rifles from traders on the coast and, in their many conflicts with the Free State forces, they learned to use these weapons to great effect.

By the early 1900s, open rebellions were becoming widespread and colonial authority was in danger of collapse. Growing African resistance, combined with international condemnation of the regime and the falling price of rubber, forced Leopold to abandon his private venture in 1908. That year he handed over the Congo Free State to a reluctant Belgian government, who renamed it the Belgian Congo (see [Map 24.1](#)). This ended the worst abuses of the system, although

private European companies remained in control of most of the territory's resources. The Belgian company Union Minière du Haut Katanga, for instance, continued with its sole right to exploit the Katanga copper mines. And in 1911, the British company Lever Brothers (later Unilever) was granted the monopoly rights to purchase all palm products from an area covering three-quarters of a million hectares.

French Equatorial Africa

Across the Congo River in Gabon, Middle Congo (Moyen Congo) and German Kamerun, the concessionary system was open to similar abuses. As much as 70 per cent of French Equatorial Africa was allocated to 41 private concessionary companies (see [Map 24.1](#)). Company agents raided the forest people, seizing hostages and forcing villagers to provide fixed quotas of ivory and rubber. In the Middle Congo, many thousands of men were forced to work as porters for very low wages, carrying supplies for the French army of conquest in Chad. Forced labour was also used in building the railway from the coast at Pointe Noire to Brazzaville on the northern shores of Malebo Pool (see [Map 24.1](#)). Living and working conditions in the forced labour camps were appalling and, in the railway project alone, an estimated 16,000 African workers died through brutality, disease or malnutrition. It is significant that in the early colonial decades in this part of Africa, population levels fell dramatically. In the short space of a few decades, the people of this region probably suffered worse than in any similar time span during the whole of the slave trade era.

Figure 24.2 The Belgian King Leopold II shown as a serpent whose rubber coils are crushing the people of the Congo. A *Punch* cartoon, November 1906.



IN THE RUBBER COILS.

SCENE—The Congo "Free" State.

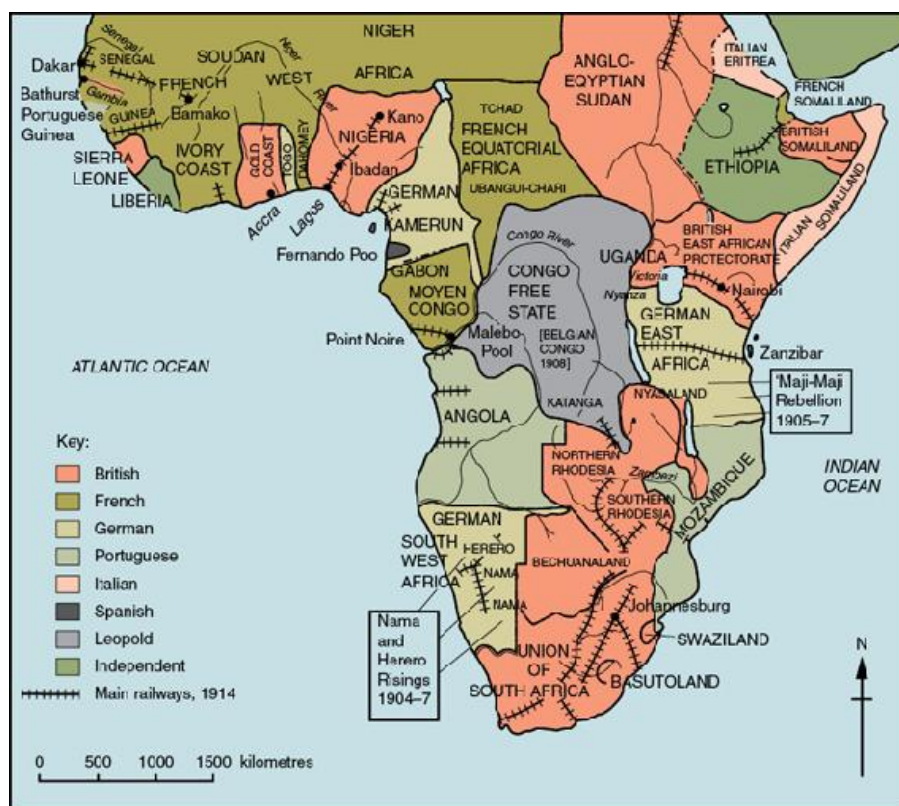
Source: © Punch Limited. Reproduced with permission.

Peasant production and railways in west Africa

The savannah and forest zones of sub-Saharan west Africa were the regions where African initiative was best able to respond to the new market opportunities of the early colonial period. Forced labour and the plundering of forest resources by European agents were characteristic of parts of the region. Rubber and hardwood, for instance, were plundered from the Côte d'Ivoire forest in the face of continued armed African resistance right up to 1915. On the whole,

however, the production of raw materials in the region was left in the hands of African peasant farmers. They were quickly found to be more efficient producers than European plantation owners, dependent as the latter were on the inefficient use of forced labour. In both French and British zones, African farmers were 'encouraged' to turn away from food crops and produce cash crops for the European markets. Production for export was stimulated by a combination of colonial demands for cash taxation, the building of railways for inland transport to the coast, and individual African initiative.

Sub-Saharan Africa in the early colonial period



Groundnuts and palm oil, the main export crops of the precolonial nineteenth century, were carried forward into the colonial period. The production of groundnuts in Senegal expanded greatly with the building of the railway, which reached from Dakar to Bamako on the

upper Niger by 1905 (see [Map 24.1](#)). Senegalese peasants migrated seasonally into the less densely populated Gambia River valley to cultivate the crop and sell their exports downstream to the coast at Bathurst (modern Banjul, capital of The Gambia). Palm oil remained the principal export of Igboland in eastern Nigeria, although palm oil exports from the French colony of Dahomey never recovered to the scale of the pre-conquest period.

The development of cocoa as an export crop from Gold Coast (Ghana) was a striking example of African initiative. It was originally brought to Gold Coast from Fernando Poo (modern Bioko, the principal island of Equatorial Guinea) by a Ga metalworker called Tetteh Quarshie in 1879. He set up a cocoa nursery on the Akwapim ridge north of Accra and, by the 1890s, was selling cocoa seedlings by the thousand to local peasant farmers. The British governor of Gold Coast set up a similar cocoa nursery in the 1880s, but the credit for the rapid spread of inland cocoa plantations lay firmly in the hands of local peasant farmers. From the Akwapim ridge, industrious farmers migrated northwards into the relatively undercultivated forest zone. There they bought land from local Akan chiefs and developed a thriving peasant-operated cocoa plantation system. By 1914, Gold Coast had become the world's largest single producer of cocoa. Apart from the payment of taxes, cocoa farmers spent their earnings on imported manufactured goods, the local building of houses, roads and bridges, and the education of children in mission schools. None of these facilities was provided by the colonial government.

The British, meanwhile, had pushed their Nigerian railway system inland from Lagos in 1896 to reach Ibadan in 1900 and Kano in 1911 ([Figure 24.3](#)). Cocoa production became an important peasant cash crop in Yorubaland south of Ibadan. The British urged the Hausa of northern Nigeria to become major producers of cotton, which they did in 1911–12; however, following a famine in 1912 in which an estimated 30,000 people died, Hausa farmers switched to growing groundnuts. Apart from the famine, they had sufficient agricultural expertise to realise that cotton was a riskier crop, more susceptible to drought and requiring greater labour to produce. The prices offered for groundnuts by European merchants at the Kano railhead were more attractive than those offered for cotton. Experienced local Hausa traders quickly spread the word and organised the local marketing networks. Within two years, the peasant farmers of Hausaland were producing so many tonnes of groundnuts that the railway was unable to cope with the traffic. As a result, the European merchants in Kano had to stockpile sacks of groundnuts in the streets.

Figure 24.3 Celebration of the opening of the Lagos Steam Tramway, Nigeria, 1902.



Source: Reproduced with permission from BECM Bristol.

Figure 24.4 The first copper smelting furnace in the Copperbelt region of Northern Rhodesia in the early 1900s. Colonial mining venturers reopened old African mine workings, initially using existing African techniques, as shown here. These techniques were widely used throughout early colonial Africa, at least until a mine had proved itself worthy of large-scale industrial development.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Peasant producers in many parts of tropical Africa undoubtedly benefited from the vastly improved transport facilities – roads, railways and harbours – which were developed in the early colonial period. But this was not without considerable cost to themselves. European governments expected their colonies to be self-financing. Thus, the construction of railways and harbours had to be paid for out of local funds. Apart from providing a large amount of (often forced and unpaid) labour that built these projects, Africans ultimately paid for their own railways and harbours through direct taxation and customs duties on imports. In many cases, railway construction companies received huge free grants of African land. European merchants and manufacturers, who benefited most from the increased trade, paid nothing towards the transport infrastructures of the colonies from which they profited.

Peasant producers, railways and white settlement in British east Africa

The peasant farmers of west Africa had not taken to the growing of raw cotton on the scale that British or French manufacturers had hoped. Their agents in Africa, such as the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA), had failed to entice the farmers of west Africa to

grow much cotton for export. The prices they offered were too low compared with other cash crops such as cocoa, palm oil or groundnuts. In Egypt and Uganda, however, the BCGA met with greater success. The completion of the Aswan Dam in 1902 meant that year-round irrigation was now possible in the lower Nile valley. Encouraged by the BCGA and British administrators in Cairo, the peasant farmers of Egypt developed an overdependence on cotton at the expense of food crops.

Uganda

The most dramatic development of cotton production in sub-Saharan Africa was in Uganda. We saw in [Chapter 14](#) that the Baganda were already familiar with intensive agricultural production. In the early 1890s, the British had used an alliance with the Christian aristocracy of Buganda to establish a protectorate over the whole region. In 1900, the British made a further agreement with the Baganda aristocracy, which laid the foundations for British rule throughout Uganda. They agreed not to take any land for white settlement and introduced a system of private land tenure. This meant that much of the agricultural land of Buganda became the privately owned estates of the Buganda chiefs with the peasantry as their tenants. The Buganda king, the *kabaka*, lost his former control over land allocation and with it most of his effective power. He became a figurehead, appointed by the colonial administration, which now assumed the power to appoint and dismiss chiefs. This system was extended to the other former kingdoms of the territory.

It was against this background that the Uganda Railway from Mombasa to Kisumu on the shores of the Victoria Nyanza was completed in 1901. A short trip across the lake brought the Baganda into touch with a cheap and easy transport system to the coast. Once the BCGA had introduced seed in 1903, cotton production for export from Uganda took off on a rapidly increasing scale. The spread of peasant cotton production in Uganda was helped by the recently established system of land tenure. Seed was initially distributed through the chiefs, who organised their tenants to grow the crop. In this way, cotton growing spread rapidly through Bunyoro and Busoga as well as through Buganda. Chiefs were enticed on to the governing board of the Uganda Company, which was founded to organise the marketing of cotton within Uganda. Within Buganda, in particular, peasant farmers began producing on their own account as well as for their chiefs. Soil and climate here was sufficiently suitable for farmers

to be able to produce the cotton crop for cash in addition to tending their banana plantations for their food. This left them with a level of security not experienced elsewhere in the continent, where the production of single cash crops for export grew to dominate over basic food production.

Kenya

From an early period, the British viewed their East African Protectorate (renamed 'Kenya' in 1920) as a potential colony for white settlement. The highlands east of the Victoria Nyanza offered a favourable climate and fertile soils, and the region was served by the newly completed Uganda Railway. Much of the best land lay within the Uganda Protectorate where white settlement had been precluded by agreement in 1900, but this problem was easily overcome. In 1902, a huge section of Uganda's territory, from the Rift Valley to the Victoria Nyanza, was transferred to the East African Protectorate. The dense population of Africans included in this transfer was viewed by the British as so many more taxpayers for their colony and potential workers on white-owned farms.

The African peoples of the region refused to give up their land and freedom without a struggle and they engaged the British in a series of wars of resistance between 1901 and 1908. British military superiority and widespread use of violence, however, eventually prevailed and plans for white settlement went ahead. The highlands were set aside for white ownership only. Indian traders who had come inland with the railway were prevented from buying land in the region. Africans already on the land were classed as 'squatters', only allowed to remain so long as the white 'owner' needed their labour. Particularly badly affected in this respect were the Gikuyu agriculturalists whose steady expansion into the fertile Rift valley region was halted and pushed back by the influx of white settlement. From the mid-1900s, white settlers were brought in from Britain and South Africa in a determined effort to turn the highlands into 'white-man's country'. The administrative capital was shifted inland to Nairobi and, from an early period, the white settlers were allowed a powerful voice in the administration of the colony.

Rebellion in the German colonies

The Maji Maji Rebellion, 1905–7

Across the border in German East Africa, colonial conquest seemed complete by the late 1890s. It had been a long drawn-out struggle and inland 'administration centres' were, in reality, little more than a series of small military fortresses. From 1898, head tax was levied on all adult Africans in the colony and a high level of violence and intimidation was used in its collection. Experiments with European-owned plantations were tried in the north near Kilimanjaro, but for a while most of the rest of the country was regarded by the Germans as little more than a source of ivory and taxation.

In July 1905, rebellion broke out in the southern part of the colony, in the hinterland of Kilwa. It began in the Matumbi Hills, when the local people resisted government attempts to force them into growing cotton for export. The revolt spread rapidly throughout the region with attacks on all foreigners: missionaries, administrators and their Swahili clerks.

It appears to have been a spontaneous rising with no previous planning and no central leadership. And yet the peoples of southern Tanzania came together in a way that is unique in the history of African resistance to colonialism. Instinctively, they turned to their beliefs in the powers of the spirit world. It was a deliberate attempt to overcome the problems that had crippled earlier African resistance to European conquest, namely the lack of African unity and the European machine gun. They sprinkled their bodies with magic water known as *maji maji*, which they believed would turn the bullets of their enemies into water. It was a simple device and one which brought the people together. The Germans were staggered by the rapid spread of the revolt and initial 'rebel' successes strengthened the belief in *maji maji*. But the turning point came at the end of only four weeks. Armed with nothing but spears and the protection of *maji maji*, the 'rebels' stormed a German machine gun post, only to be mown down in their thousands. Although the revolt continued to spread, it had lost its initial momentum. The power of *maji maji* had been weakened and political unity gradually fell apart.

By the end of 1905, the Germans had brought in reinforcements, recruited from Somaliland and New Guinea. During 1906, the Germans gradually brought the central highland region back under their control. They pursued a punitive, 'scorched-earth' policy, destroying villages and laying waste vast stretches of southern and central Tanzania. While official German figures claimed that 26,000 'rebels' were killed in military action, an estimated further 50,000 Tanzanians died in the famine that ensued.

Despite its defeat, the rebellion did have some positive impact. In the immediate aftermath, the Germans reduced their use of violence

in enforcing their authority, for fear of provoking another rising. They encouraged mission school attendance and made European employers accept some responsibility for the health of their workers. But, more important in the long term, the Maji Maji Rebellion had shown that, under pressure, Africans could put aside traditional rivalries and unite in the struggle against the extremities of colonial dictatorship. This presaged the later anti-colonial nationalism of the 1950s and 60s that would eventually defeat colonialism. The sacrifice of the thousands of Tanzanians who died during the rebellion was an important inspiration to a later generation of nationalists who brought their country to independence in the early 1960s.

The Herero and Nama uprisings, 1904–7

Meanwhile, in their colony of South West Africa, the Germans were vigorously pushing forward a policy of white settlement in the central highland region. Nama and Herero pastoralists had suffered heavy cattle losses in the rinderpest epidemic of 1896–7. White settlers took advantage of this misfortune to occupy valuable African grazing land, which was now temporarily underused. At the same time, white traders systematically stripped African pastoralists of their few remaining cattle in order to stock the newly acquired white-owned ranches. Traders extended loans of food and clothing to impoverished African stock owners and then insisted on repayment in the form of their few remaining livestock. The arrival of labour recruiters from Johannesburg in the early 1900s was regarded by the Herero leadership as a deliberate white conspiracy to destroy the Herero nation by stripping it of its able-bodied young men.

In 1904, the Herero rose up in revolt, killed over 100 German traders and settlers and reoccupied much of their former territory. But they failed to persuade the Nama to join them until it was too late. By then, the Germans had brought in reinforcements from abroad and had isolated the Herero in the Waterberg. When the Herero broke out of their encirclement, Lothar von Trotha, the German commander in chief, issued his notorious genocide proclamation:

The Herero are no longer German subjects. They have murdered and plundered ... The Herero nation must leave the country. If it will not do so I shall compel it by force ... Inside German territory every Herero tribesman, armed or unarmed, with or without cattle, will be shot. No women and children will be allowed in the territory: they will be driven back to their people or fired on. These

are the last words to the Herero nation from me, the great General of the mighty German Emperor.¹

The retreating Herero were driven westwards into the Kalahari Desert, where tens of thousands died of thirst and starvation. By the time von Trotha's proclamation was withdrawn at the end of 1905, a mere 16,000 Herero were left alive within the territory out of a previous population of 80,000. Only 2,000 refugees reached neighbouring Bechuanaland.

In the meantime, the Nama too had risen in revolt. Under the able leadership of Hendrik Witbooi, they waged a successful guerrilla campaign. They managed to tie the German forces down until at least the end of 1905, when the ageing Witbooi was killed. Thereafter, Nama unity gradually fell apart. Other Nama leaders continued the resistance into 1907, but the Germans gradually reasserted their control.

At the end of the war, the Germans destroyed any remaining Nama and Herero independence by confiscating all their cattle and deposing all their chiefs. The survivors were forced into the position of a subordinate, low-paid workforce, serving the German farms and mines. But so many Nama and Herero had been killed during the war that German labour agents had to seek new recruits from Ovamboland in the north. By the outbreak of the First World War, hatred of German rule had become so intense that some of the southern Nama welcomed the South African army when it invaded the territory in the early months of 1915.

Figure 24.5 Captured Herero, during the uprising of 1904–6. Prisoners such as these were used for forced labour.



Source: Interfoto/Alamy Stock Images.

Missionaries, Christianity and early expressions of 'nationalism'

African political and religious authorities were generally closely allied. Even in the smallest scale society, the chief was usually the guardian of religious shrines or protector of the ancestral spirits. The European destruction or weakening of African political authority, therefore, also weakened the authority of traditional African religion. This opened the way for the spread of Christianity. The opening decades of the twentieth century were thus a major growth period for Christian missionary expansion. An important factor in this growth was the mission provision of some small degree of elementary education and rudimentary health clinics. These were services to which the new colonial governments paid little or no attention. It was probably these badly needed services that attracted Africans in their thousands to the mission establishments in the 1910s and 20s.

By then, however, some of the earlier converts to Christianity had already felt the yoke of a religion so closely tied to European culture and political power. In the 1880s and 90s in South Africa, African

Christian clergymen had rebelled against European domination of their churches. A number of them formed their own independent Christian churches, often encouraged by American evangelists. The movement was known as the 'Ethiopian church' movement (or Ethiopianism), after the use of 'Ethiopia' as a name for Africa in the Christian Bible. The tendency to reject European control and to form independent African churches spread to central Africa in the wake of expanding European colonialism.

African church leaders took the teachings of the Bible more literally than some of their European peers. They saw in the Bible the doctrines of justice and the equality of humankind. The promise of a 'second coming' was seen by many as heralding an end to the oppression of the new colonial regimes. In this respect, the African Independent Churches can be seen as an early expression of African nationalist sentiment against European colonialism.

One of the strongest voices of African Christian protest came from Elliot Kamwana's Watchtower sect, founded in Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1906. *The Watchtower* was the name of the magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, whom Kamwana had joined during a visit to South Africa. Kamwana preached a 'second coming', which would liberate all of Africa. Colonial taxation would be ended and Africans would achieve political self-government. He predicted that this would happen in 1914. He was an inspirational speaker and people flocked to join his church. By the time he was arrested by the colonial authorities and deported to South Africa in 1909, he had baptised 11,000 people. Kamwana's message was so appealing, however, that even without its figurehead, his Watchtower movement grew in strength and operated clandestinely in neighbouring Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and the Belgian Congo, where colonial rule was particularly severe. When Kamwana's exile ended in 1914 and the 'second coming' failed to materialise, he travelled to Mozambique, but the Portuguese deported him back to Nyasaland. There, the colonial regime feared his influence during an uprising that broke out in January 1915, so they detained him again and this time exiled him to Mauritius for 22 years.

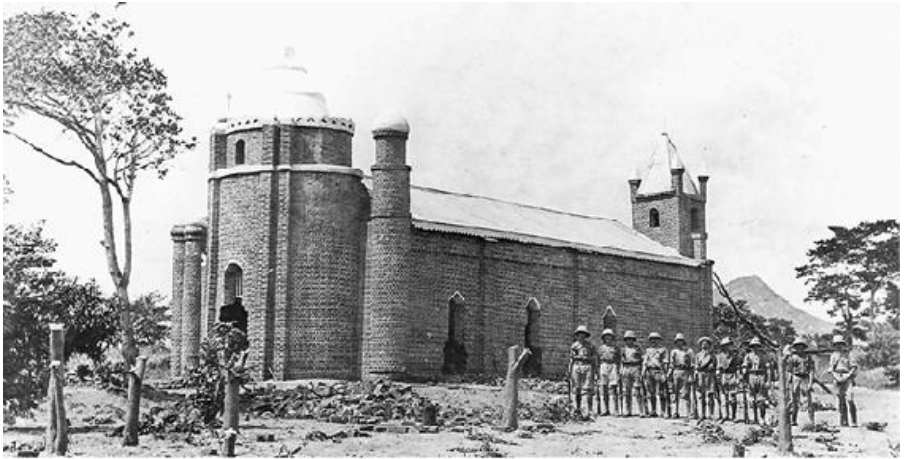
A historically better known African Christian figure of the period was John Chilembwe (Figure 24.6), who was responsible for that 1915 uprising in Nyasaland. Chilembwe was baptised by the radical English Baptist missionary Joseph Booth, who took him to the United States in 1897. That year Booth published *Africa for the African*, a book highly critical of the whole concept of colonial rule. In America, with the help of the Baptist Convention, Chilembwe attended the Virginia Theological College, returning to Nyasaland in 1900 as an ordained Baptist minister. He founded his own Providence Industrial Mission in

the Shire Highlands, an area of white plantation settlement (Figure 24.7). He soon clashed with neighbouring white estate owners over the way they treated their plantation workers. This got him a bad reputation among the white settlers, but gained him instant credibility among the estate workers who subsequently flocked to his mission. Chilembwe's list of local and general grievances became particularly intense during the famine of 1913. And then, on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the British demanded that Africans serve in the colonial army on the borderlands between Nyasaland and German East Africa (Tanganyika). It was the last straw for Chilembwe. Railing against this 'shedding of innocent African blood,' he led his followers in a brief rebellion in January 1915. He knew that ridding the country of the colonial regime was a hopeless task, but he was resolved to 'strike a blow and die'. And he did indeed die, shot a week later while trying to escape across the border into Mozambique. His church was destroyed, his congregation scattered and his close adherents summarily executed: hanged or shot by firing squad. But the blow Chilembwe struck was symbolic, an inspiration to a later generation, which earned him an honourable place in the folklore of the Malawian nationalist movement.

Figure 24.6 John Chilembwe's Providence Industrial Mission, Mbombwe, Nyasaland (Malawi), c.1912. Chilembwe (seated right, wearing glasses) and some of his congregation in front of their newly constructed church. By 1915, the mission's roll contained 1,160 'baptised believers'.



Figure 24.7 Chilembwe's expanded and upgraded 'cathedral', completed in 1913, before and after its destruction by colonial troops, 26 January 1915.



The First World War and Africa, 1914–18

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, it was, at first, essentially a European conflict. But the fact that the major European powers had colonies in Africa meant that the war had a considerable impact in Africa itself. The British joined their French allies in invading the German west African colonies of Togo and Kamerun.

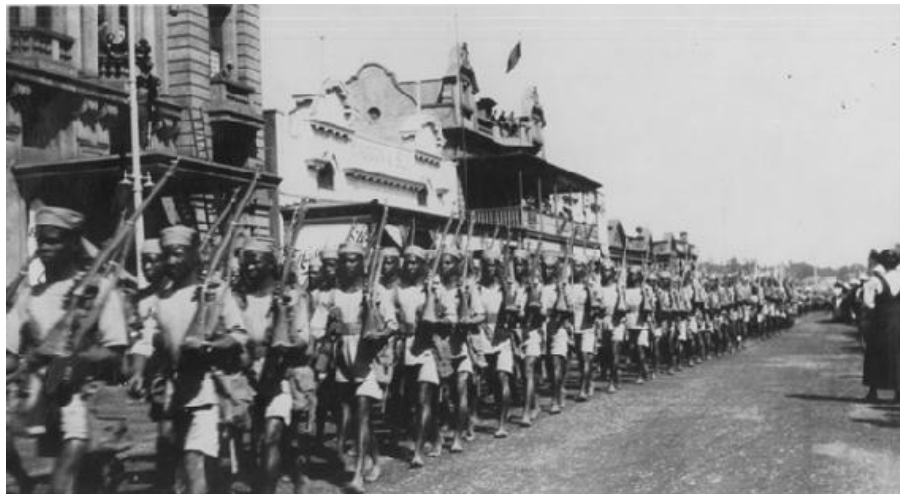
Togo was easily overrun, but the struggle for Kamerun went on until February 1916. This left four-fifths of the country occupied by the French and one-fifth, bordering Nigeria, occupied by the British. Meanwhile, the forces of the newly united white government of South Africa had occupied the German colony of South West Africa. The longest conflict was in German East Africa. Here, South African forces joined with British east and west African troops in a campaign that lasted for the duration of the war. Once the territory had been occupied, by the British from the north and the Belgians from the west, the German General von Lettow-Vorbeck led his troops in an undefeated campaign through Mozambique, Nyasaland and northeastern Rhodesia (Figure 24.8).

Figure 24.8 Von Lettow-Vorbeck, the undefeated German military commander, and his east African *askaris*, Kasama, northern Rhodesia, November 1918.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Figure 24.9 The Rhodesia Regiment marching through Salisbury (modern Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe) bound for east Africa, during the First World War.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The destruction caused by the Kamerun and east African campaigns caused severe hardship to the rural peoples of the region. Their villages were often burned and their food supplies and labour were indiscriminately requisitioned by the opposing armies. Both sides used scorched-earth tactics, destroying crops and villages to deprive their opponents of support and supplies. Cattle, whose numbers were just beginning to recover from the devastation of the rinderpest pandemic of the 1890s, were a particular target of the military campaigns, providing food for the armies and depriving their owners of the means of subsistence. Famine was widespread in 1916–18, even in Rwanda, which was not in the direct theatre of war. An estimated 1 million Kenyans and Tanzanians were forcibly conscripted to serve as porters for the armies of the east African campaign. Up to 100,000 of these porters died from disease, malnutrition or overwork. Similarly, in Egypt, British troops ‘requisitioned’ Egyptian corn, cotton, camels and labour in their campaign against the Ottoman allies of Germany.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that most of the troops on either side of the war in tropical Africa were in fact Africans, recruited or pressed into service by their European rulers. The Germans in east Africa recruited their *askaris* (Swahili word for soldiers) from among Africans whom they had recently conquered, such as the Ngoni. The British recruited 50,000 troops from Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria for their east African campaign, while the South Africans recruited blacks but did not allow them to carry rifles. The South African government believed that it would establish a dangerous precedent to allow Africans to shoot white people – a practice that might encourage them to subsequently turn their guns on South African whites.

The British were somewhat hesitant about recruiting Africans for direct use in the European theatre of war, possibly for the same reasons that the South Africans applied in the east Africa campaign. Not so the French. In total, some 600,000 Africans were recruited or conscripted into the French army, 150,000 of these served in the trenches of the European Western Front, of whom 30,000 were killed in action. A further 40,000 African troops died fighting for France around the eastern Mediterranean and in Africa. One Moroccan regiment that featured regularly in the casualty lists became the most highly decorated regiment in the whole of the French army. The French also conscripted 140,000 labourers, mostly from north Africa, for service in the war.

Figure 24.10 Preparation of a troop train at Lomé ahead of the Anglo-French conquest of Togoland (now Togo). In August 1914, a combined British and French force conquered Togoland and established a joint protectorate while another Anglo-French force overran Cameroon, although the German forces did not surrender here until 4 March 1916.



Source: Popperfoto/Getty Images.

When the French tried to enforce military conscription in west Africa, they were faced with widespread rebellion, especially in the Sahelian and desert regions of their vast African empire. In 1916, the Tuareg of French Soudan (modern Mali) rose up in open revolt, a

rebellion that took French legionnaires more than a year to suppress. The Germans and their Ottoman allies tried stoking these rebellions, but their provision of firearms was sporadic and rebel attacks were ill coordinated. In fact, the war years were when the French completed their conquest of the remaining independent peoples of their vast African empire, both in the desert regions and in the forests of Côte d'Ivoire.

The British, too, used the war years to take firmer hold of Egypt and to seize control of Darfur. In Egypt, they gave up their pretence of merely providing support for Ottoman rule in the territory, for Britain was now at war with the Ottoman Empire. The British deposed Khedive Abbas, declared a formal protectorate over Egypt and turned the delta region into their principal military base in the eastern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, south of Egypt and to the west of Sudan, the Sultanate of Darfur had remained, until now, one of the few remaining uncolonised states on the continent. The sultan of Darfur had been a close ally and tributary of the Mahdist state that had driven the Egyptians out of Sudan in the 1880s. When the Anglo-Egyptian force under General Kitchener had conquered Sudan in 1898, they had left Darfur as an insignificant Saharan sultanate to their west. But on the outbreak of war in 1914, Sultan Ali Dinar declared an alliance with the Ottomans and also with the Sanusiyya, a Sufi religious order that was fighting the Italians in Libya. The Italians were allies of the British at the time, so in 1916, Sir Reginald Wingate, the British military ruler of Sudan, invaded Darfur, brought it under military occupation and incorporated it into colonial Sudan.

Figure 24.11 African machine gun detachment, eastern Belgian Congo, 1916.



Away from the direct African theatres and zones of intense conscription, the impact of the war varied enormously across the continent. Soon after the outbreak of war, shipping lanes became badly disrupted, with the result that exports of cash crops and other raw materials were severely curtailed. Prices paid for cash crops fell, while the cost of imports rose sharply. This resulted in a sharp recession for the newly emerging colonial economies. Peasant producers and industrial workers were impoverished and their health declined. From 1916, however, allied shipping lanes were generally restored, which was a great boost for cash crops such as the groundnuts and palm oil of Nigeria. At the same time, African clerical workers gained access to jobs vacated by whites called up for military service. South Africa, already Africa's foremost industrial economy, gained a further boost as it geared up to meet wartime demands for food, minerals and engineering maintenance for shipping. Economic and social wartime gains, however, were few compared to the losses suffered by Africans across the continent. And immediate political gains were nonexistent.

Consequences of the war

There were two significant social consequences of Africa's wartime experiences that were ultimately to have political implications later in the century. One was a wearing away of much of the aura of European invincibility that had accompanied the speed and ruthlessness of colonial conquest in the preceding decades. The other was the emergence of urbanisation in tropical Africa. Mediterranean north Africa had long had an urban culture, as had parts of South Africa and west Africa. But the vast majority of tropical Africans had hitherto lived a predominantly rural life, in relatively small towns and villages that were intimately connected with the local production of food and trading goods. Heavy wartime pressures on rural communities, however, destroyed or seriously weakened indigenous rural economies and prompted many to seek work in coastal ports or new colonial administrative centres. And those who had served abroad in the war had no intention of slotting back into rural poverty. Instead, they joined the ranks of the urban poor. A generation later those who had grown up in these burgeoning urban centres and colonial capitals were to provide the backbone of the mid-century resistance to colonial rule on the continent.

The First World War and Africa, 1914–18



The general ravages of the First World War were compounded by famine and the influenza pandemic that followed in 1918–19. Spread along the coast and inland along the new railway lines, influenza struck hardest where people were already weakened by warfare, hunger or poor working conditions. Vast areas of east, west and central Africa lost up to 3 per cent of their population, while in southern Rhodesia an estimated 7 per cent of black mine workers succumbed to the disease.

In January 1918, shortly after the USA entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson pronounced ‘Fourteen Points’ that ought to form the

basis of any postwar settlement. These included the right of ‘self-determination of nations’, and general freedom from oppression. He also proposed the setting up of ‘a general association of nations’ that would help prevent future wars and would protect the smaller nations from foreign occupation. Wilson’s ‘self-determination’ referred principally to the main theatres of war in Europe and western Asia that had been under German and Ottoman occupation. But his declaration encouraged educated Africans to believe that the settlement after the war might be the first step on their own road to freedom from colonial occupation. Consequently, after the war ended in November 1918, a number of African political parties applied to be represented at the peace conference that assembled at Versailles in France in the early months of 1919. Among these was the forerunner of the African National Congress, the South African Native National Congress (founded in 1912). It was seeking freedom from white domination (see [Chapter 25](#)). Similarly, the Wafd, the Egyptian nationalist party, was seeking an end to the British wartime ‘protectorate’ and the restoration of Egyptian independence (see [Chapter 25](#)). Neither party, however, was allowed to attend the Versailles Peace Conference.

For Africa, the most important outcome of the Versailles Peace Conference was the setting up of the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia was the only independent African founder member. The League of Nations took over responsibility for the former German African colonies and promptly delegated this responsibility to their French, British and Belgian occupiers. Thus, the French and British shared Togo and Kamerun (Cameroon in English, Cameroun in French), the Belgians got Rwanda and Burundi, and the British kept Tanganyika and delegated responsibility for South West Africa (Namibia) to the white-ruled Union of South Africa. The League of Nations ‘mandate’ under which these occupying powers held their new territories bound them to safeguard the interests of their African inhabitants and prepare them for eventual self-government. However, in practice, the European victors treated their new acquisitions much like any other colony.

1 Quoted in Bley, H. (1971) *South-West Africa under German Rule: 1894–1914* (Heinemann: London), pp. 163–4.

Far from bringing modern health benefits to Africa, as later generations of colonial apologists used to claim, the first thing that colonial rule brought was an increase in fatal disease. The influenza pandemic of 1918–19 that followed the First World War campaign in eastern Africa is merely the best known episode. The incidents of other pandemics were most often sparked by large-scale population

displacement. Within eastern Africa, the war, combined with early European settlement, left large areas depopulated. Relieved of human cultivating and herding activities, dense bush was able to recover and with it, the tsetse fly – the carrier of sleeping sickness – bringing death to humans as well as cattle. Another new major killer was tuberculosis, which thrived in the rising colonial urban centres of African wage labour, especially in the crowded, unhealthy conditions of mining compounds.

Within the new urban centres, any early colonial focus on combating disease was directed towards either keeping African mine labour fit enough to work, or keeping Europeans safe from ‘African disease’ – it being assumed that the unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions were somehow uniquely African rather than a colonial social construct.



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Chapter 25

Africa between the wars: the high tide of colonial rule

The economic impact of colonial rule

The expansion of white settlement

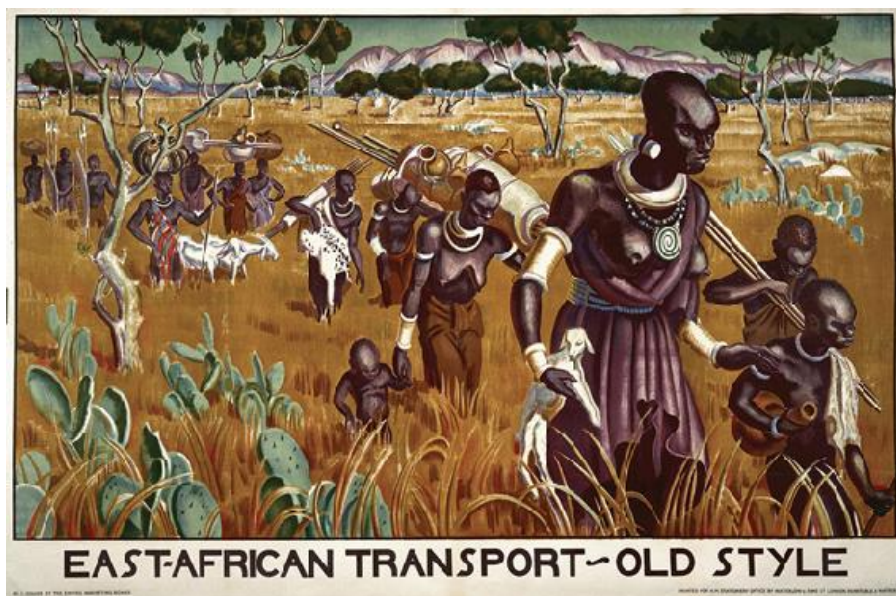
The most prominent colonies of white settlement in tropical Africa were Kenya and Southern Rhodesia. It used to be assumed that these were the only ones 'chosen' for extensive white settlement because of their favourable highland climate. The implication of this notion of choice was that the lowland west and central African zones were deliberately avoided by white settlers because of their uncomfortable heat and humidity and the prevalence of tropical disease. In fact, Europeans did try to establish white settlement in most tropical African colonies. Where European settlement failed to become the dominant economic force, it had more to do with African initiative than with European discomfort.

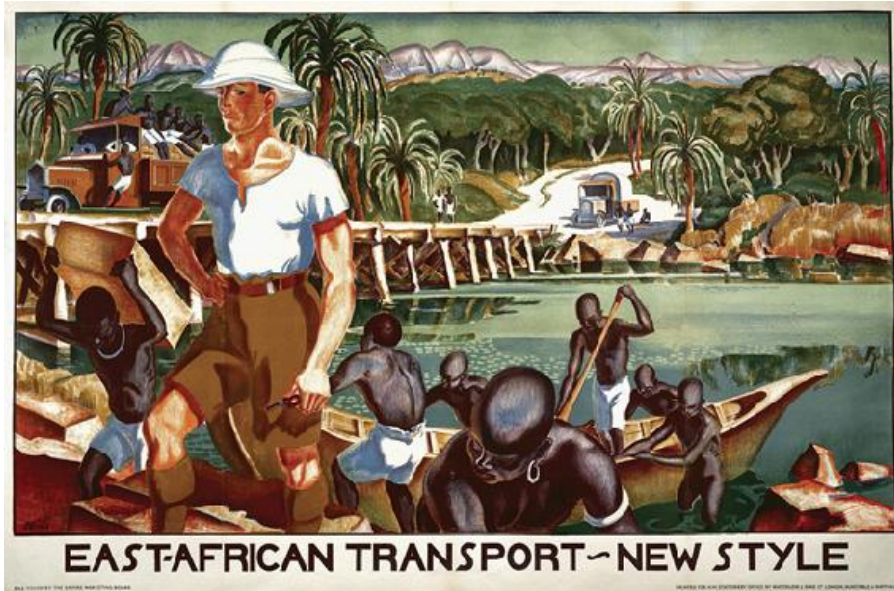
In many parts of tropical west Africa, for instance, land was extensively occupied by African farmers already engaged in cash crop production. The French persistently attempted to push forward white settler agriculture in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. But European-run plantations in west Africa were not a great success, dependent as they were on forced and unwilling, low-paid labour. Generally, they could not compete with the more numerous, more efficient, small-scale family farms of the African peasants. In some colonies, European settlement was prevented by direct African political opposition. In Gold Coast, for instance, educated African Christians banded with traditional rulers to form the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society. In 1898, it had successfully petitioned the British government against

allowing the alienation (arbitrary seizure) of African land to Europeans. Similar African opposition had prevented the early alienation of African land in southern Nigeria. Meanwhile, at the other end of the continent, the Tswana chiefs of Bechuanaland had successfully petitioned the British government against their territory being handed over to the white colonists of Rhodesia.

Even in the French colony of Algeria, white settler agriculture only succeeded because it was heavily subsidised by the majority Muslim population. European settlement had only been made possible in Algeria by extensive and costly nineteenth-century military conquest. By the 1920s, white settlers 'owned' most of the decent arable land in Algeria north of the Sahara. 'Native' Algerian Muslims had to resort to cultivating marginal, former grazing land. The result was rapid land deterioration and famine in times of drought. Under pressure from government taxation, Muslims were therefore forced to accept the low-paid seasonal labour offered on white-owned farms. At the same time, the income from this taxation was spent by the government on loans, grants, research advice and marketing facilities for the white settler farmers.

Figure 25.1 Two Empire Marketing Board posters, 1930–1. Artist: Adrian Allinson.





Source: National Archives. Reproduced with permission.

A similar system of subsidies drawn from 'native' taxation was what established white settler agriculture in Kenya and Rhodesia. African peasant production was deliberately discriminated against in both settler colonies. Africans were forced off the best land and only allowed back if they worked as labour tenants. The dreaded pass system, known in Kenya as *kipande*, placed severe restrictions on African freedom of movement outside their 'reserves', the land set aside for African occupation. In Kenya, in a bid to protect white settlers from local competition, Africans were forbidden to grow *Arabica* coffee, the country's most profitable cash crop. By the 1920s, there was a general decline in the productivity of Kenyan and Rhodesian peasants in favour of the white settlers, who received marketing help and cash subsidies. Even so, not much more than 10 per cent of white-owned land in either colony was ever actually cultivated, a point much resented by Africans restricted to poor quality and overcrowded 'reserves'. Ugandan peasants produced more in export crops – cotton and groundnuts – than all the white farmers of the Kenyan highlands.

European-run plantations were a feature of parts of Mozambique, Angola and the Belgian Congo. But these were not comparable to the individual, small settler estates characteristic of Kenya or Rhodesia. Large commercial companies employed European managers to run their huge plantations, such as Unilever's palm oil estates in Belgian Congo and the Mozambique Company's sugar plantations in northern Mozambique. Little was invested in research, technology and

transport. Production was often fairly inefficient and a high level of violence was used to force labour on the projects.

Cash crops and peasant production

Small-scale peasant farmers still dominated cash crop production in much of tropical Africa. Groundnuts remained the dominant cash crop of northern Nigeria and Senegal. Coffee was developed as a profitable peasant crop in Côte d'Ivoire, Angola, Tanganyika, Uganda and eastern Belgian Congo. Cocoa was even more successful and remained the principal export crop of the Gold Coast and southwestern Nigeria. Cotton, low priced and labour intensive, was usually only produced under pressure from Europeans. In an effort to satisfy the demands of the French textile industry, peasant production of cotton was made compulsory in certain parts of Ubangui-Chari (Central African Republic), Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), Soudan (Mali) and Niger. In the Djazira plains of Sudan, between the Blue and White Nile, the British government sponsored a vast irrigation scheme to promote the peasant production of cotton in the area. African tenants of the scheme, however, lost access to other land for growing food and only received 40 per cent of the profits from their cotton.

Successful cash crop production did not necessarily mean widespread rural prosperity. African peasant farmers still grew most of their own basic foodstuffs. But the importation of mass-produced, European manufactured cloth and metal goods was undermining African industrial self-sufficiency. African peasants still built their own homes out of locally available material and some still wove their own cotton cloth. The woman's hoe, harvesting basket and water pot might still be locally manufactured, but the man's machete and axe were likely to be imported. And former luxuries of diet, such as imported sugar, were becoming a necessity. Cheap rice from French Indo-China was imported into French west African colonies and sold at rates that undercut local food producers. African peasant farmers, who had often started the growth of cash crops for export under pressure from colonial taxation, rapidly became dependent on the imports their crops might buy. And this was where they fell into a poverty trap, because the prices paid for exports and the prices demanded for imports were beyond their control.

Trade regulation at the coast was in the hands of a small number of large European merchant companies, which ensured that prices paid to African producers were maintained at the lowest possible level. If higher prices were obtained in Europe, the merchants kept the difference as extra profit for themselves. Those same merchants

controlled the sale of manufactured goods imported from Europe; when prices rose in Europe, the increase was immediately passed on to the African buyer. In general, then, during the 1920s and 30s, African farmers were paid less for what they produced, but had to pay more for what they bought. This was particularly the case after the Great Depression, which struck Europe and the United States in 1929–30. With falling real incomes and the constant pressure of colonial taxation, African peasants had to bring more and more land into cash crop production. Food crops were neglected, soil became exhausted and, in times of drought, famine struck. In 1931, famine killed nearly half the population in some areas of Niger.

Figure 25.2 Workers on a colonial cotton plantation, Magomero, Nyasaland (Malawi), 1908. Many of the cotton pickers of this estate became involved in the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 (see [Chapter 24](#)).



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Mining

The sector of the colonial economy most profitable for capital investment was mining. Colonial authorities assumed all rights over minerals within their territories. These were then leased to European-owned companies for them to exploit. The British thus took over the goldfields of Asante. The Buré goldfields of nearby Guinea were found

to be of insufficient quality to attract French companies and individual Africans were allowed to continue mining gold in Guinea on a small scale. Other major mineral outcrops that attracted European mining capital to west Africa were the ancient tin mines of the Jos plateau region in northern Nigeria. These were exploited by low-technology, open-cast mining using huge quantities of unskilled African labour. The Niger famine of the early 1930s brought thousands of impoverished people to northern Nigeria and enabled the mining companies to lower the wages they offered. By then, Nigeria had become the world's fourth-largest producer of tin.

The richest part of tropical Africa for European mineral exploitation in this period was the central African region of Katanga in the southeast of the Belgian Congo and the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. The Belgian company Union Minière had obtained exclusive control of copper mining in Katanga. It drew much of its initial labour from nearby Northern Rhodesia, where British South Africa Company agents were vigorously pressing demands for cash taxation. Katanga copper mining was financed mainly by Rhodesian and South African capital and the railway through Northern Rhodesia was built to serve the Katanga mines. The settlement of white farmers along the Northern Rhodesian line of rail was to grow maize and cattle to feed the Katanga miners.

Figure 25.3 Ashanti Obuasi Gold Mines Corporation, colonial period, Gold Coast (Ghana). Note the rows of tiny workers' houses (centre right) contrasted with what is probably the European manager's house (right foreground)



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

In the 1920s, mining began in earnest on the Northern Rhodesian side of the Copperbelt, and the Congo border was then closed to labour recruiters from Katanga. The Northern Rhodesian mining companies pursued a deliberate policy of maintaining workers on a migrant labour basis. Workers were employed on short-term contracts and were paid just enough to support a single man. Employers assumed that the man's family was supported by his wife's subsistence farming in the remote rural areas, although this was often not the case. Migrant workers were employed as unskilled labour, the better paid skilled jobs being reserved for whites, mostly from South Africa.

When Union Minière lost its source of labour from Northern Rhodesia, the company began recruiting from within the Congo and from Rwanda/Burundi. But unlike its Northern Rhodesian neighbours, Union Minière stabilised its labour force by offering three-year contracts and encouraging wives to settle near the mines. The company paid Catholic missionaries to provide basic primary schooling. It allowed African workers to develop certain mining skills and thus move into slightly better paid jobs. Even so, wages were still very low and wives were expected to supplement the family income by growing their own food.

Southern Rhodesia was another important zone of European mining enterprise. Besides the coal of Hwange, which provided the Copperbelt/Katanga mines with most of their industrial fuel, Southern Rhodesia became a major producer of gold, copper and asbestos. The dominant industrial mining centre of southern Africa, the Witwatersrand, will be considered further in the final section of this

Labour and taxation

A major feature of the colonial economies in this period was the development of migrant labour. Colonial authorities almost universally imposed a head tax on all adult men: usually about £1 a year, or its equivalent. This amounted to at least a month's wages on white-owned mines or two months or more on a white-owned farm. The purpose of the tax was twofold: to pay for colonial administration and to force all adult men into the cash economy, in particular, to work for low wages for European colonists; a deliberate attempt to break African rural self-sufficiency.

It was no longer enough for a community to feed, clothe and house itself. Cash had to be found to pay taxes, regardless of a family's income. In areas where cash crops could not be readily grown and profitably sold, this meant migration to places of wage employment. But European employers, in the towns and in the mines, offered only very low wages, not enough to feed and clothe a whole family. Accommodation, when it was provided, was only ever for a single person. The worker's family must therefore remain at home in some far-off rural area and try to grow enough food to feed themselves. When the worker returned home, he was left with little for his family after he had paid his taxes.

[Map 25.1](#) gives some idea of the range of migrant labour movements over the continent in this period. It should be noted that some of those in west Africa and Uganda went for work on agricultural projects that were owned and run by Africans. These included the cocoa and coffee farms of Gold Coast, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, the groundnut zones of Gambia and Senegal, or the cotton and groundnut farms of the lakeside region of Uganda. The work was seasonal and payment was usually by a portion of the harvest. In west Africa, many of those seeking work of this kind were fleeing from French attempts to enforce the compulsory cultivation of cotton in Soudan, Niger and Upper Volta.

From all the major centres of European employment – mines, farms and plantations – recruiting agents were sent out to hire large amounts of unskilled labour at the lowest possible wage. A wide range of methods were used to persuade, cajole or force people into entering labour contracts lasting anything from three months to a year. Recruiting agencies were granted monopolies over certain zones. The agents were then able to fix wages at very low rates, because there was nowhere else where a man seeking work could get employment.

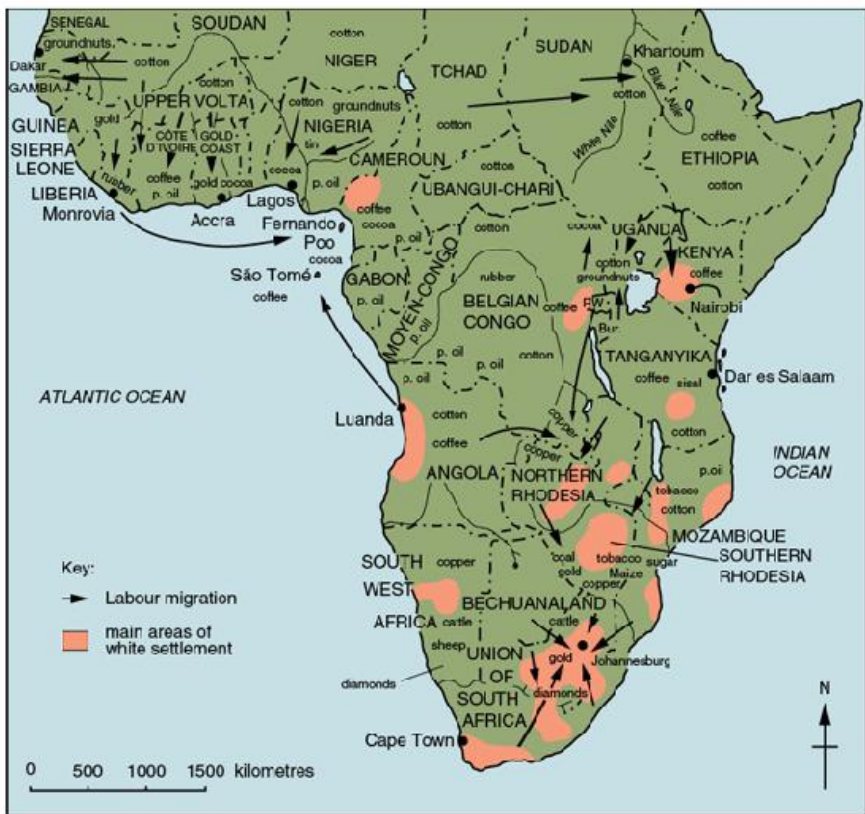
The Portuguese authorities of Mozambique, for instance, granted a recruiting monopoly to the Witwatersrand Native Labour Agency. In return, the mining companies agreed to use the Portuguese railway to the Mozambique port of Lourenço Marques. As a result, under pressure from the Portuguese, southern Mozambique became little more than a vast pool of labour for the gold mines of Johannesburg.

Similarly, Nyasaland was treated largely as a pool of labour for the farms and mines of Southern Rhodesia. The recruitment of Copperbelt/Katanga labour was discussed above. From northern Angola, Portuguese agents recruited labour for the new coffee plantations on São Tomé. Here, recruitment was little different from slavery, for workers were paid a pittance and few were ever allowed to return to their families.

All over the continent, chiefs were pressured into acting as unofficial agents to serve the labour needs of European farming and mining enterprises. In areas of high European settlement, Africans were pushed into wage labour as a result of being forced off their land. Those allowed back on the land were expected to perform various unpaid labour services for the white landowner. In addition, in most colonies, Africans were expected to work for no pay on local public works such as road and bridge construction. In the French-controlled colonies, this was known as *corvée* labour and was regulated to a minimum of 7–14 days a year. Forced labour was one of the most hated aspects of colonial rule.

Conditions were little different in the independent west African state of Liberia. In 1925, the US Firestone Rubber Company leased nearly half a million hectares of potential plantation land from the government of Liberia. Firestone professed to be helping the development of the country. It did improve the port facilities at Monrovia and arranged an American loan to help Liberia with its foreign debts. But Firestone paid only a nominal rent for its rubber plantations and paid no income tax on profits in Liberia. In fact, its main motive in setting up business in Liberia was to take advantage of what it saw as the 'practically inexhaustible' supply of indigenous labour in the country. Also, it was the only lowland tropical African country not under some form of European colonial control.

Colonial exploitation of sub-Saharan Africa in the interwar period



Under the terms of the agreement, the Liberian government undertook to supply the Firestone plantations with up to 50,000 workers a year. These were drawn mainly from the Kru population of the interior. As elsewhere, chiefs were used to round up recruits and force them to sign contracts with Firestone for very low wages. The chiefs were backed up by the Liberian army, which raided villages that were slow to produce recruits. Army raids were also used in the same period to ‘recruit’ contract workers from Liberia for the Spanish cocoa plantations on Fernando Poo.

The nature and impact of colonial administration

Historians have argued for years over the merits and demerits, similarities and differences, of the French and British ‘systems’ of colonial administration: French *assimilation* and British indirect rule. In recent decades, less emphasis has been given to the theoretical differences between the systems and more to the impact these systems had on the majority of African colonial subjects. At the local level, and

from the point of view of the African subject majority, all 'systems' of colonial administration were remarkably similar in practice.

The French originally sought to 'assimilate' their colonial subjects into becoming cultural Frenchmen, regardless of their skin colour. They were to have the full legal and political rights of French citizenship, including the right to send representatives to the French parliament in Paris. This may have worked in the mid-nineteenth century while their tropical African colonies consisted of a mere handful of trading posts on the coast of Senegal. But once large-scale colonisation of the continent began in the later nineteenth century, the French abandoned assimilation for all but the citizens of the original four Senegalese towns (Dakar, Saint-Louis, Gorée and Rufisque) and a few highly educated, French-speaking Africans. The French continued to hold up potential assimilation as an ideal for which all Africans should strive. But French authorities made the educational qualifications for African assimilation extremely difficult to achieve. And few Africans sought the status, for it involved a total rejection of their African personality and culture. By the 1930s, the assimilated of the 'Four Communes' of Senegal numbered 50,000, while the few additional 'selectively assimilated' Africans never numbered more than 500. The remaining 15 million people of France's tropical African empire were classified as *sujets* ('subjects'), and as such were denied virtually any legal or political rights at all.

The French broke up the large precolonial states like Dahomey, Tukolor and Futa Jalon and made use of African chiefs at the lower levels of local government. District and village chiefs were appointed or dismissed at will by provincial French administrators. It was the duty of these French-appointed 'chiefs' to collect taxes, recruit labour, especially forced *corvée* labour, and suppress rural African opposition. Any who failed to perform to French satisfaction were replaced. As a result, many of these so-called 'chiefs' had little if any 'traditional' chiefly entitlement. Their qualification for office was more likely to be an ability to speak French than any familiarity with the language and customs of their 'subjects'. They became, in effect, French government officials, denied any independent religious or legal authority. In this way, the French effectively destroyed African customary law. The law to which Africans were most commonly subjected was the *indigenat*. This notorious colonial law entitled French provincial administrators to imprison any African *sujet* indefinitely and without charge or trial.

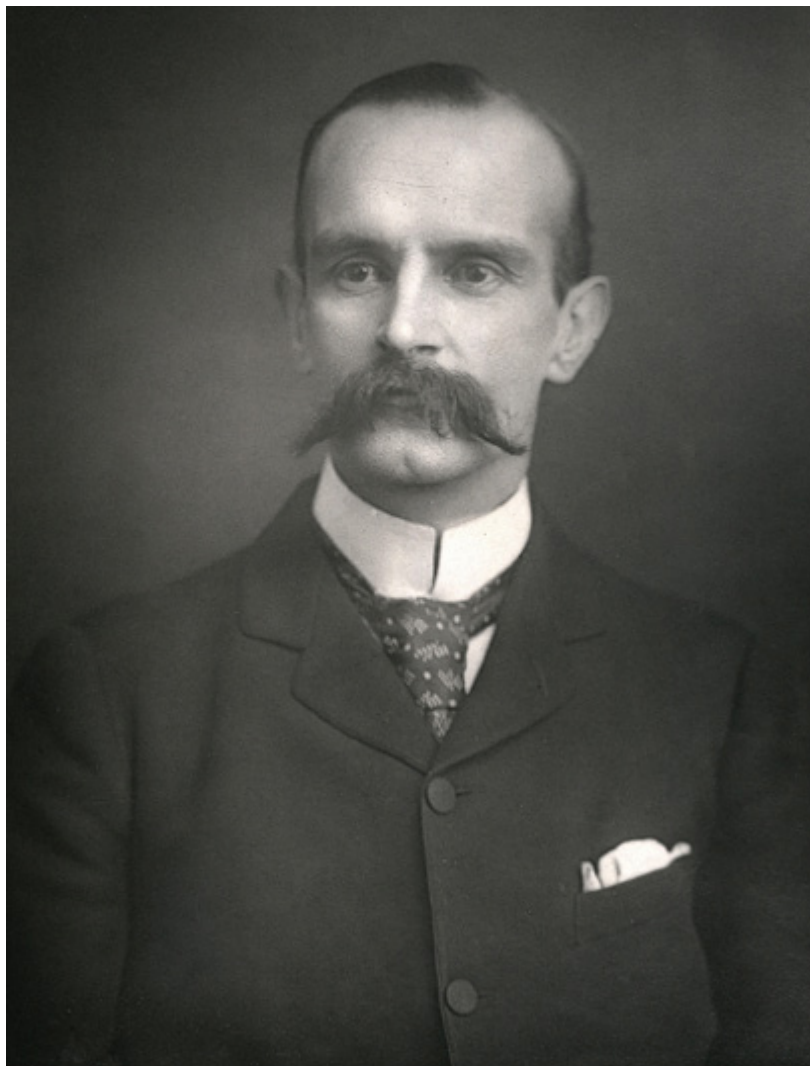
In north Africa, the French ruled the settler colony of Algeria as though it were a part of mainland France, although with the important distinction that the majority Muslim subjects were denied the rights of citizens. In the neighbouring 'protectorate' of Morocco,

the French ruled, in theory, in the name of the sultan, their own nominee. In practice, they were occupied for most of this period in military conquest of the peoples of the mountainous interior.

The British, too, made use of 'traditional' African rulers at local government level, in particular the collection of taxes, the recruiting of labour and the controlling of potential African unrest. But they raised the practice to a 'theory' of colonial administration, calling it 'indirect rule'. The theory was most clearly formulated by Frederick Lugard (see [Figure 25.4](#)), former governor of Nigeria, in his book *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, published in 1922. Lugard described the system of government he had worked out for the administration of the Sokoto emirates of northern Nigeria ([Figure 25.5](#)). He recommended its application to all British tropical African colonies. The British believed indirect rule was the cheapest and most effective way of administering vast populations stretched over even vaster territories with the minimum of European personnel. But indirect rule was far from being a clear-cut system. Its application varied enormously from colony to colony.

Uncooperative chiefs were dismissed and suitable replacements were found. In this case, the British paid slightly more attention than the French to the legitimacy of a candidate's claim to the chieftaincy. Nevertheless, the British had no scruples about inventing new chieftaincies in former 'stateless' societies, such as the Igbo of Nigeria and the Kikuyu of Kenya, where chiefs had previously not been known above the local village level.

Figure 25.4 Frederick Lugard (1858–1945), colonial administrator, established British military control of Uganda (1890–2). As British high commissioner to Northern Nigeria (1900–6), he pragmatically and successfully negotiated a system of indirect rule with the emirs of Sokoto. His unification of Northern and Southern Nigeria, as governor-general, 1912–19, was less successful, leaving the country with deep cultural and political divisions. Photo by Downey in the Cabinet Portrait Gallery.



Source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

Unlike the French, the British made greater use of African 'customary law', although British colonial administrators did not hesitate to adapt, change and, if necessary, *invent* African 'customary law' when it suited their own purposes. Chiefs were allowed to judge local civil disputes and try minor criminal cases, although they were never allowed to try serious criminal cases or any dispute involving a European. British attention to 'customary law', however, was not because of any particular respect for things African, but rather because of its administrative convenience. The chief performed a whole range of legal duties, which would otherwise have required the costly and time-consuming attention of the colonial administration. And retaining the chief as the mediator between ruler and ruled

helped blunt the impact of colonial overrule. When the chief was presented with unpopular colonial laws to enforce, it was the chief who received the full weight of local African hostility.

The whole colonial emphasis on the role of chiefs exaggerated so-called 'tribal' differences. The very word 'tribe' was deliberately used in a derogatory sense by European colonists who looked down on African societies as 'primitive' and 'inferior'. The British based their local administration on what they saw as a series of minor but totally separate precolonial chiefdoms. In order to make this a reality, they emphasised differences of dialect and redefined them as totally separate languages. They described customary differences of dress, housing and religious practices in terms of rigid 'tribal' distinctions. In many precolonial African societies, there had been considerable overlap between the peoples, languages and customs of a region. Where competition and conflict between groups had existed, it was for political power or economic advantage rather than simply because they were of different 'tribes'. Indeed, it has been argued that colonial authorities *invented* 'tribalism'. By insisting on the strength of 'tribal' differences and rivalries, colonists made it more difficult for Africans to achieve unity in opposition.

Figure 25.5 The sultan of Sokoto, the religious head of Hausaland and spiritual leader of the nation's Muslims, 1903. He is wearing a *hassa* or turban. It was with Sokoto that Lugard evolved his system of 'indirect rule'.



THE SULTAN OF SOKOTO, RELIGIOUS HEAD OF HAUSSALAND.

Source: *Illustrated London News/Hulton Archive/Getty Images*.

This was particularly so among the rural population of settler colonies such as Southern Rhodesia, where each 'tribe' was isolated in its own separate 'reserve'. In this example, the vast majority of the rural population of the eastern two-thirds of the country (today's Zimbabwe) were Shona speakers with common historic origins who had shown little overt political rivalry in precolonial times. The British, however, exaggerated any perceived cultural differences and thus made use of the age-old imperial maxim: 'divide and rule'. The practice of separation into distinct 'tribes' was so thorough in some settler colonies, such as Kenya, that some subject peoples began to believe in their supposedly historic hostility to other 'tribes'. This was to store up problems for future national stability after independence.

Portuguese administrative policy was similar to the French in principle. A small number of select individuals who had adopted Portuguese language and culture were classified as *civilisado* (later

renamed *assimilado*) and were excused the tax and labour demands made on their fellow African subjects. But they were never allowed the kind of voting rights in local or central government enjoyed by French assimilated 'citizens' in Senegal. The *civilisados* were only ever a very small minority, in this period mostly of mixed race origin. They lived in the towns and worked as clerks, teachers and petty traders, totally divorced in culture and outlook from the majority *indigena* population.

Figure 25.6 The presentation of gifts to a chief by a colonial official as the British assume control of Zomba district in the Zambezi valley, Northern Rhodesia, June 1902.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The Belgians used a mixture of French and British systems for their colonial administration. They recognised the cultural 'assimilation' of a tiny minority of mission-educated Africans, known as *évolués*, but like their Portuguese counterparts, these were never allowed any participation in local politics. Education above rudimentary primary level was actively discouraged. Appointment and use of chiefs in local government was fairly arbitrary, dependent on local circumstances and administrative convenience. On the other hand, where there still existed a clearly defined precolonial authority structure, as in Rwanda and Burundi, this was utilised in a form of controlled 'indirect rule'.

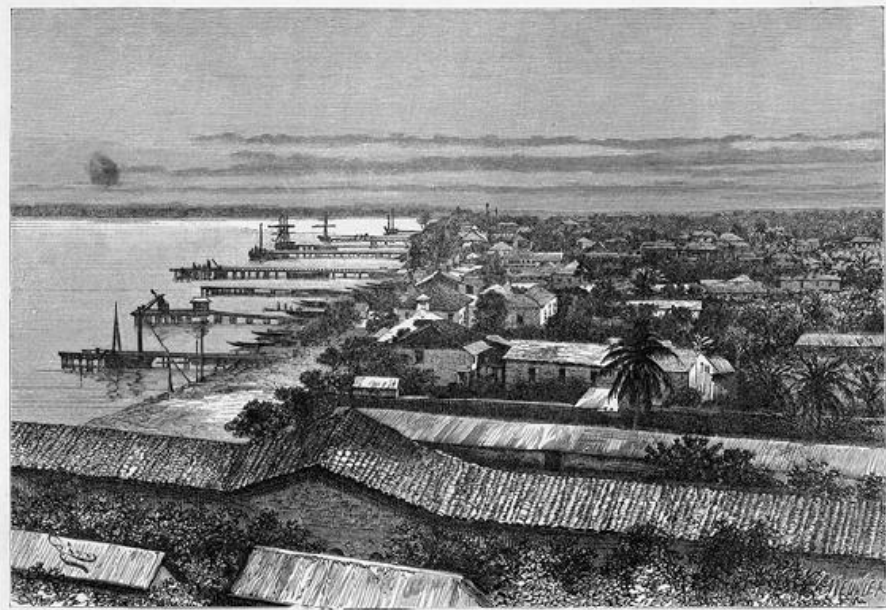


For more on historical coverage of the colonial administrations and further reading suggestions, see 'Colonial Administration' on the companion website, at www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

The spread of Islam in tropical west Africa

We saw in [Chapter 24](#) how European conquest opened the gates for the spread of Christian mission influence. Ironically, the period of consolidated European colonial rule witnessed a parallel and even greater spread of Islam in tropical west Africa. The colonists' use of Muslim emirs under the guise of 'indirect rule' strengthened the position of Islam in the northern savannah regions. European colonial rule may have ended the nineteenth-century period of conversion by conquest; but by confirming Islamic rulers as the 'traditional' African authorities, it eased the gradual conversion of the mass of their 'subject' people. In places like the Sokoto province of Ilorin, for instance, Muslims were only recent conquerors. European overrule confirmed their position and eased the mass conversion of the Yoruba of Ilorin.

Figure 25.7 Bird's-eye view of the port of Lagos, Nigeria, c.1870. The rapid transformation of Lagos into a modern port city began in the decade of the colonial conquest of Nigeria, 1892–1902. Anonymous engraving.



Source: *Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo*.

In addition, the reorientation of trade away from the desert prompted Muslim penetration of the southern savannah, forest and coastal zones of west Africa. During the colonial period, Islam became an important element in all the major ports such as Lagos, Dakar, Freetown, Conakry and Accra. Islam had an advantage in that, unlike Christianity, it was not associated directly with the European colonial power. Furthermore, Islam did not insist on the abandonment of important African customary practices such as polygamy. Thus, under European colonial rule, Islam had greater success than Christianity in terms of numbers of new converts. In Senegal, where Islam had a long tradition, Muslim brotherhoods flourished, uninterrupted by colonial authority. And across the continent in Sudan, the British positively discouraged the work of Christian missionaries in the northern half of the country as likely to disrupt the relative calm of existing Islamic domination. As it was, the British had problems suppressing a serious 'Mahdist' revolt in Darfur in 1921–2.

Education: from precolonial tradition to colonial reality

Precolonial African education

Education in precolonial Africa was of two principal types. In north Africa, the Sahara, the Sahel and the east African Swahili coast where Islam predominated, basic education was widespread and closely connected to religion. Children (mostly boys) aged between 6 and 12 attended Qur'anic schools where they learned, by rote, Arabic verses from the Qur'an. This provided them with basic literacy in Arabic, to which was added some elementary numeracy. Levels of learning varied enormously at these schools. Those who did well, and whose parents could afford it, went to study under a learned *marabout* or *mallam* (spiritual guide). A few, who mastered Arabic, might go on to study theology and Islamic law at the universities of Jenne or Timbuktu in west Africa, or at Qayrawan in Tunisia or Cairo's al-Azhar.

In the preliterate societies of sub-Saharan Africa, education in precolonial times was generally less formal, but it was universal and compulsory for boys and girls. Although there was enormous variation in the content of this education from one part of the continent to another, the methods and principles were generally similar. Boys and girls learned their religious beliefs and their economic and social skills for life from their parents and other older relatives. From the elders of their extended family, they learned the history of their ancestors and the oral traditions and customs of their community or nation. Children were brought up to value the wisdom of their elders, a vital component of a preliterate oral culture, and much of what they absorbed from their elders was instilled by rote learning.

Sometime after puberty, boys and girls separately attended initiation schools where they were housed for a number of weeks, isolated from the rest of the community. Here, their informal education was consolidated with formal instruction in religious beliefs and practices, gender-related social and sexual mores, moral behaviour, and tests of personal character, such as courage and endurance. This culminated in an initiation ceremony, often involving circumcision, and sometimes including facial or bodily scarification. On emerging from initiation school, 'graduates' were expected to assume the duties and responsibilities of adults, although at a low social level, in accordance with their age and marital status.

In parts of sub-Saharan Africa where Islamic penetration was slight or only recent, the two systems of education, Qur'anic and indigenous, existed side by side, with many children attending both.

Early colonial education strategies

French and British imperialists decided not to interfere with existing Muslim systems of education, especially in northern Africa where Islam was almost universal. Similarly, Qur'anic schools flourished in colonial west Africa in the wake of the general spread of Islam, discussed above, and aided by the colonial destruction or weakening of indigenous societies. At the same time, Christian missionaries attacked indigenous social mores, and the initiation schools, partly for their sex education, but primarily for their religious content. This turned many people towards Qur'anic schools, specifically because they were *not* associated with the European intrusion.

Apart from their toleration of Qur'anic schools, in the early decades of their rule, colonial governments generally left education to the Christian missionary societies, some of which had a considerable history in the region (see [Chapter 20](#)). Like the Qur'anic schools, Christian mission schools provided a basic education in religion and literacy. The Protestant missionaries based their teaching on the Bible, parts of which they translated into local languages. Catholic missionaries based theirs on the Catechism, that small booklet that listed the fundamental beliefs of the faith. It was translated into the local languages and taught by rote.

By the 1920s, colonial governments began to take a more active interest in education. In French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, they began subsidising the mission schools; but with the subsidy came control of the curriculum, which now focused on literacy, numeracy and French language and culture. Anything to do with African history or culture was definitely not on the curriculum.

In French West Africa, a small number of state primary schools were set up, most of them in Senegal. The William Ponty School, founded in 1903, offered a three-year training course for teachers, medical assistants, interpreters and clerks. Being the only one of its kind in French West Africa, it is not surprising to find that, among William Ponty's alumni from the interwar years, there were no fewer than five first presidents of Francophone west African countries as they gained their independence in 1960. In French Equatorial Africa, there was no state secondary education until the 1930s when one secondary school was established in Brazzaville.

Basically, colonial governments were only interested in training a small élite to fill the lower rungs of the administrative service. They saw mass education as a danger to be avoided. Thus, aside from the

Qur'anic schools, in French West and Equatorial Africa in the 1920s, a mere 3 per cent of school-age children attended school, mission or state.

Within the British sphere, 'western' education had a somewhat longer history. Mission education, with its emphasis on literacy for the primary purpose of promoting religious instruction, still predominated until at least the 1930s. However, in Sierra Leone, Fourah Bay College (founded in 1827), owned by the Church Missionary Society as a seminary and teacher training college, had been affiliated to the University of Durham since 1876. In the early colonial period, many of Fourah Bay's students came from the Gold Coast, where Governor Guggisberg made a concerted effort to make education a cornerstone of colonial policy. He founded west Africa's first state secondary school, Achimota.

Nevertheless, the British, like the French, based their educational provision primarily on providing financial support to pre-existing mission schools, with the result that, even in the Gold Coast, fewer than 10 per cent of school-age children attended state-aided schools in the early 1920s. In Nigeria, with a far larger population, colonial funds to aid mission education were pitifully inadequate. In southern Nigeria and Kenya, so-called 'hedge schools' proliferated where basically educated individuals passed on their literacy, numeracy and English-language skills to the local population in informal outdoor settings. The very independence of these informal schools, however, caused considerable concern to colonial authorities who feared they might become hotbeds of anti-colonial intrigue.

The Phelps-Stokes Education Commission

In 1921, the US Phelps-Stokes Education Commission reported on education in British tropical Africa. Despite being independently funded and committed to African American education in the United States, the report reflected British colonial thinking of the time. It recommended an increase in educational provision, but made the dated assumption that Africans lived primarily in rural, subsistence-based communities, and therefore would need only basic literacy and numeracy, combined with a little vocational training in agriculture, building and carpentry. The Phelps-Stokes Report took no account of the rapid urbanisation and labour migrancy that, even as early as the 1920s, was increasingly typical of African daily living. What Africans needed and were increasingly demanding was access to secondary and higher education, with curricula that paralleled the academic education available to Europeans.

By the end of the 1930s, colonial authorities were beginning to take these realities on board. Nevertheless, until the 1950s or 60s, the curricula for African education reflected a deliberate rejection and denigration of African culture, language and history. Africans were taught that before the coming of the European, Africa was primitive and barbaric. They were taught the superiority of European technology, culture and civilisation. They learned the history of France and England, or that of 'heroic' Europeans in Africa, but they were taught nothing of their own historical past, or their indigenous technology and achievements.

In the decades either side of the Second World War, Africans who were determined to seek further education had to go abroad. French speakers went to France, while English speakers went mostly to African American institutions in North America. In the 1930s and 40s, more than 100 west Africans went to US universities, among them Azikiwe ('Zik') of Nigeria and Nkrumah of the Gold Coast, both graduates of Lincoln University. From among these overseas graduates came most of the leaders of the nationalist and independence movements that followed in the decades after the Second World War.

African nationalism and protest movements in the interwar years

Rebellion and religious opposition

African acceptance of colonial domination in this period was anything but calm. For instance, in the early years of the twentieth century, the French gradually extended their rule from Senegal over the territory to their north, known as Mauritania. Governor Coppolani incorporated the main southern emirates through a series of treaties; but following his assassination in 1905, the northern emirate of Adrar, which had so far resisted incorporation, was declared to be in rebellion. By 1912, open revolt had been militarily defeated, but it was to be 1934 before all resistance had been suppressed.

In spite of difficulties such as this, large-scale rebellion was, by the 1920s, generally less common. An important and little-known exception was a rebellion by 350,000 Baya in French Equatorial Africa in the late 1920s. The Baya, among others, had suffered from being forced to cultivate cotton for export as well as being conscripted into the building of a railway from the coast to the capital Brazzaville on

the lower Congo. The general brutality and injustices of French rule in this period provoked regular uprisings throughout the 1920s, culminating in the revolt of 1928. Known as the Kongo-Wara rebellion (1928–31), from the word for ‘hoe handle’, the symbol of the peasantry, the revolt was led by a messianic holy man named Karinou who claimed supernatural powers. What started as a non-violent campaign soon turned to a violent revolt by the long-oppressed Baya. After some initial successes, the Baya suffered a major defeat at the hands of French reinforcements in which Karinou was killed. When resistance continued into the 1930s the French resorted to blowing up the caves where thousands of rebels and refugees had sought refuge. The scale of the slaughter that accompanied the violent suppression of this revolt was one of the great atrocities of colonial rule in tropical Africa.

Independent Christian churches continued to spread. In the Belgian Congo, Simon Kimbangu founded his own church in 1921 and declared himself a prophet. He was reputed to be able to perform miracles and cure the sick, and he preached that God would soon deliver the Congolese people from colonial oppression. Although the Belgians quickly imprisoned him, ‘Kimbanguism’ persisted through the 1920s and 30s, with his followers refusing to pay taxes or grow export crops for the government. Periodic revivals of Kimbanguism occurred at times of drought and particular rural hardship. Kimbanguists believed in the imminent and miraculous return of their Prophet Kimbangu, although in fact he remained in prison until his death in 1951.

Action by workers

On the whole, Africans in the interwar years were learning how to come to terms with the new order, and in due course how to overthrow and transform it. The formation of workers’ unions was still in its infancy and all forms of trades union activity was proscribed as illegal. Nevertheless, workers staged a number of spontaneous strikes for better pay and working conditions. The more significant of these were on the mines and railways of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Gold Coast in the 1920s and on the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia in 1935 and 1940. The cocoa farmers of the Gold Coast gave an early demonstration of the potential impact of effective African unity. During the First World War, they withheld their cocoa harvests until prices offered by coastal merchants were increased. They subsequently formed a cocoa farmers’ federation and used the same tactics again in the 1930s.

Figure 25.8 Marcus Garvey, then head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and self-styled 'Provisional President of the Republic of Africa', rides through Harlem, New York City, in his formal uniform. Garvey, born in Jamaica in 1887, was an early exponent of justice and equality for black people. He died in England in 1940.



Source: New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images.

Meanwhile, all over tropical Africa in the 1920s and 30s, Africans were forming self-help welfare associations, which were used increasingly to protest against specific local injustices. At the same time, in the ports and administrative towns of east, west and central Africa, there was the steady growth of a new, educated African élite – clerks, interpreters, traders, teachers and clergymen. They were particularly conscious of the social and economic injustices of colonial society and their own exclusion from the politics of their country. Few as yet, however, outside Algeria and Tunisia and the coastal towns of

British west Africa, thought in terms of political independence as the possible solution to their problems.

Pan-Africanism and Négritude

An important influence on the educated élite was the Pan-African movement that was awakening a new self-confidence among people of African descent in north America and the Caribbean in the 1920s. A particularly influential African American Pan-Africanist was the writer and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois. He had taken part in a Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 and between 1919 and 1927 he was involved in the organisation of no fewer than seven Pan-African Congresses in London, Paris, Brussels, Lisbon and New York. Although they called for the end of racial discrimination and the colonial empires in Africa, these congresses attracted little attention within Africa itself. There, the most influential of the Pan-Africanist voices was that of Marcus Garvey ([Figure 25.8](#)). Garvey, Jamaican-born founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the widely circulated newspaper *Negro World*, never visited Africa himself. Yet his flamboyant style and confident preaching of ‘Africa for the Africans’, and the expulsion of all Europeans, was an important inspiration for many young, educated Africans who were to rise to prominence in the nationalist struggles of the 1940s and 50s.

Similarly, French-speaking writers from the Caribbean and west Africa developed a new sense of black self-respect through a movement known as ‘*Négritude*’. Thus, the writings of the Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor (see [Chapter 27](#)) celebrated the African’s ‘blackness’ and a deep pride in the ancient cultures of Africa. *Négritude* was an important psychological boost in a time of European cultural dominance, a clear rejection of the French ‘assimilation’ policy.

Nationalism in Egypt

It was only in Egypt that the rising wave of African nationalism achieved any substantial political gains in this period. The rapid rise of Egyptian nationalism in 1918–19 was prompted by the oppression that Egyptians had suffered from British demands for food, animals and labour during the war. Peasants, lawyers, civil servants, landowners, Christians and Muslims displayed a rare spirit of unity in their demands for an independent Egypt. The lead was taken by a group of intellectuals who formed a political party known as the Wafd. It was led by a prominent lawyer named Sa’ad Zaghlul, who had held ministerial office under the prewar British-dominated government. British attempts to silence Zaghlul by exiling him to

Malta merely converted him from government stooge to nationalist hero. When the British failed to respond to the Wafd's demands, demonstrations, strikes and riots forced their hand. The British managed to defuse the situation by briefly exiling Zaghlul to the Seychelles and, in his absence, by agreeing to a declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922. Sultan Fu'ad became king of Egypt and a form of parliamentary government was established. Zaghlul was allowed to return to Egypt to partake in the January 1924 general election in which his Wafd party swept the board. In practice, however, the British army remained in occupation of Egypt and was still the real source of power behind the throne. Then, in the 1930s, the 'Muslim Brotherhood' awoke a new generation of young Egyptians to a wider Islamic 'nationalism'. Their immediate appeal was a rejection of European influence and materialism and the political corruption of parliament and monarchy.

Segregation, nationalism and protest in South Africa

Various forms of African nationalism have, since the 1950s, overthrown European colonial or white minority rule throughout the continent. Ironically, since ultimately they were the last to achieve political liberation (in 1994), it was the peoples of South Africa who led the growth of African nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was in South Africa that some of the continent's earliest independent Christian churches and African-owned and edited newspapers were founded in the 1880s, 90s and early 1900s. These were followed in 1912 by the formation in South Africa of the continent's first modern African nationalist political party. But these pioneering African nationalists failed to achieve their goals. Their growth was paralleled by a steady strengthening of white political and economic domination, especially Afrikaner domination. ('Afrikaner' was the name used by the descendants of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch settlers.)

Between 1910 and 1940, successive white governments of the Union of South Africa passed a series of laws that imposed a system of racial segregation in the country. This segregationist legislation laid the foundations on which the Afrikaner nationalist government, which came to power in 1948, built the system of apartheid (see [Chapter 29](#)). Segregation was largely motivated by maintaining white domination of the two main sectors of the economy: mining and landownership/agriculture.

Under pressure from white mine workers between 1913 and 1922,

the government legalised a 'colour bar' in the mining industry. This reserved all skilled and better paid jobs for white people, while confining black people to the unskilled, lowest paid jobs. The Natives Land Act 1913 restricted black people to a mere 7 per cent of the land in the Union of South Africa (increased to 13 per cent in 1936), despite the fact that they outnumbered white people by five to one. This led to widespread evictions from white-owned land. Black people were pushed into the already overcrowded 'reserves' or migrated to the towns in search of work. The government sought to control the movement of labour and prevent too many unemployed black people from settling in the towns, by tightening up its 'pass laws'. This forced black adults to carry a 'pass' at all times indicating their 'tribal' origin and the name of their employer. If found without a valid pass, a black person could be arrested, fined or imprisoned, forced to sign a low-paid work contract with a white employer or expelled to some remote rural 'reserve'. Finally, in 1936, the white government abolished the right of 11,000 black people to vote in the parliamentary elections of the Cape Province (formerly Cape Colony). Until this time, well-educated black men who owned property or had well-paid jobs had been allowed to vote in this one province of the Union of South Africa. Now that right was summarily removed.



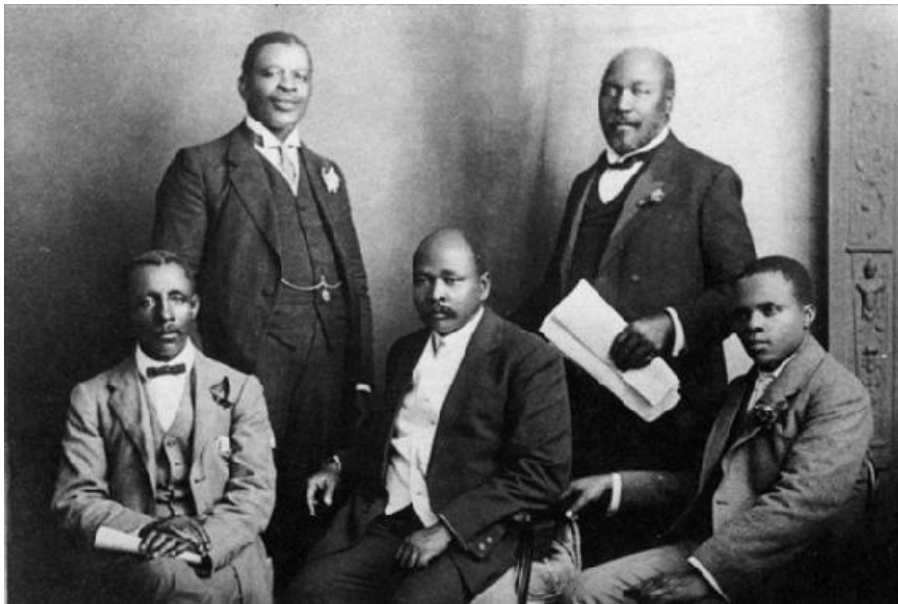
or more detail on the gradual evolution of the apartheid system and the motivations behind it, and further reading suggestions, see 'Segregation in South Africa' on the companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e/additional

Black resistance to these assaults on their political, social and economic freedom took many forms. In the rural areas, peasants resisted government regulations on the dipping and movement of their animals and fled from their homes to avoid paying taxes. In the urban area of Johannesburg, municipal workers went on strike for better pay and conditions. There were huge anti-pass demonstrations in 1919, and 40,000 black mine workers went on strike in 1920. On each occasion, police used violence to break up the strikes and demonstrations, and thousands of workers were sacked. In 1919, Clements Kadalie, a clerk from Nyasaland, founded the Industrial and

Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) among Cape Town dockers. When their strike for higher wages was successful, the fame and membership of the ICU spread like a bushfire right across South Africa, especially among rural workers who were facing eviction. By 1926, the ICU claimed a membership of 100,000. However, the union's leadership did not know how to make use of their potential power and were reluctant to call for widespread strikes. As a result, the union fell apart, having achieved little beyond proving the existence of a national worker consciousness and showing a brief glimpse of the possibilities for future union movements.

Meanwhile, in 1912, the educated African élite of teachers, clerks, clergymen, lawyers and journalists had formed their first national political party, the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), renamed the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923. But it was cautious in its tactics. It worked strictly within the law, confining its actions to meetings, protests and petitions to the government; all to no avail. The South African government ignored its protests and pressed ahead with its racist legislation. Nevertheless, ANC conferences and meetings in this period, and ANC cooperation with the representatives of Indian and 'coloured' (mixed race) political parties, laid the foundations for the later development of more widespread mass political action.

Figure 25.9 The SANNC delegation to London, 1914. Left to right: Thomas Mapikela, treasurer (eastern Cape businessman); Rev. Walter Rubusana, vice-president (Congregational minister and only black member of Cape provincial council); Rev. John Dube, president (Natal school principal and newspaper editor); Saul Msane, vice-president (gold mine compound manager and labour recruiter); Sol Plaatje, general secretary (northern Cape newspaper owner and editor). As can be seen from their occupations, the founding executive committee members were part of an African professional class who saw no reason, other than blatant racist discrimination, why they should not be accorded the same equal rights as their white peers, and they appealed to the much-vaunted British sense of 'justice and fair play', but to no avail.



Source: © Africa Media Online/Mary Evans.



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CHAPTER 26

The Second World War and Africa

Fascism and the world at war

When Britain and France declared war on Hitler's Nazi Germany in September 1939, their African colonies were once more drawn into a European conflict that was not of their making. Fascist dictatorships had been established in Italy, Germany, Portugal and Spain in the 1920s and 30s. Fascist political parties believed in the seizure of power by force, the denial of democratic freedoms and the racial inferiority of subject peoples (all reminiscent of certain aspects of European colonial rule in Africa). Fascists were particularly dedicated to the destruction of all aspects of socialism and communism. In May 1940, German armies overran Holland and Belgium, invaded France and drove the British army out of northern France. With German victory in sight, Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy, brought his country into the war on the side of Germany on 10 June 1940. By then, the militarist government of Japan had already joined the so-called 'Axis powers'. By the end of June, the German army had occupied northern France and installed a puppet government at Vichy in southern France. Charles de Gaulle, a French colonel, formed a 'Free French' government in exile. This division into 'Vichy' government in France and 'Free French' government in exile was to have an important impact on France's African colonies, as we shall see below.

Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941 brought the Soviet Union into the war. Meanwhile, Japanese forces were busy occupying western China and French southeast Asia. In the early months of 1942, Japan overran British-ruled Malaysia and Burma, and Dutch Indonesia. By then, the Japanese attack on the US navy in Pearl

Harbor, Hawaii (December 1941) had brought the USA into the war. Against the three 'Axis powers' were now ranged the Allied forces of the USA, the Soviet Union, Britain and the latter's colonies and dominions. The war had assumed a truly worldwide dimension. But what of Africa's role in this conflict?

While Europe, Asia and North America were drawn into full-scale war between 1939 and 1941, for Africa the war against fascist aggression had, in fact, begun as early as 1935 with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. (Ethiopia was known to Europeans as Abyssinia, a name thought to be drawn from an old Arabic name for the Aksumite kingdom.)

Fascist aggression and the Second World War in north and northeast Africa

Background: the Italian conquest of Libya

Italy, a relatively new European power (Italian unity having only been completed in 1870), had competed in the 'Scramble for Africa' with rather less success than her main European rivals. In the 'Horn of Africa', Italy had occupied the Eritrean and southern Somali coasts during the 1880s, but their invasion of Ethiopia had been repulsed at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 ([Chapter 21](#)). It was not until 1911–13 that Italy seized Libya, the last remaining independent Ottoman territory in north Africa. However, the Sanusiyya, a Sufi brotherhood named after its founder Muhammad al-Sanusi, organised a brilliant guerrilla campaign in the eastern Libyan Desert that kept the Italian invaders at bay until 1931. In the end, Italy only overcame Sanusiyya resistance through the deployment of tens of thousands of Italian troops, combined with aerial bombing of civilian targets, the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of civilians in concentration camps, and the construction of massive barbed wire fences across the Libyan Desert. An estimated 100,000 civilians died in the appalling conditions of the concentration camps. 'Umar al-Mukhtar, the Sanusiyya leader, was eventually captured and executed in September 1931. With his death, Libyan resistance finally collapsed. Italian forces were now freed up for Mussolini's long-awaited dream; the re-invasion of Ethiopia and revenge for the humiliation of Adwa.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia

Apart from Liberia, colonised by African Americans in the 1820s and

30s, by the early 1930s Ethiopia was the only remaining independent African state that had not fallen under some form of European control. Ras Tafari, a Shoan aristocrat and distant relative of Menelik II (d.1913), had become regent to the empress in 1916. In 1930, he succeeded as emperor and took the title Haile Selassie. Ethiopia was a founding member of the League of Nations (forerunner of the United Nations, founded in 1920 in the aftermath of the horrific slaughter in Europe during the First World War). The League of Nations was the first international organisation specifically dedicated to the maintenance of world peace, and Haile Selassie expected the other member states to protect his country from Italian aggression. But in this he was to be sorely disappointed. In October 1935, an Italian army of 120,000 men crossed the Somali and Eritrean borders into Ethiopia ([Map 26.1](#)). This time, the Italians had the military advantage of aeroplanes, armoured cars and modern artillery. Even so, it was many months before their defeat of the Ethiopian army was complete. By then, they had wreaked havoc on the Ethiopian countryside, bombing villages and spreading poison gas from the air (see [Figure 26.1](#)).

Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1935–41

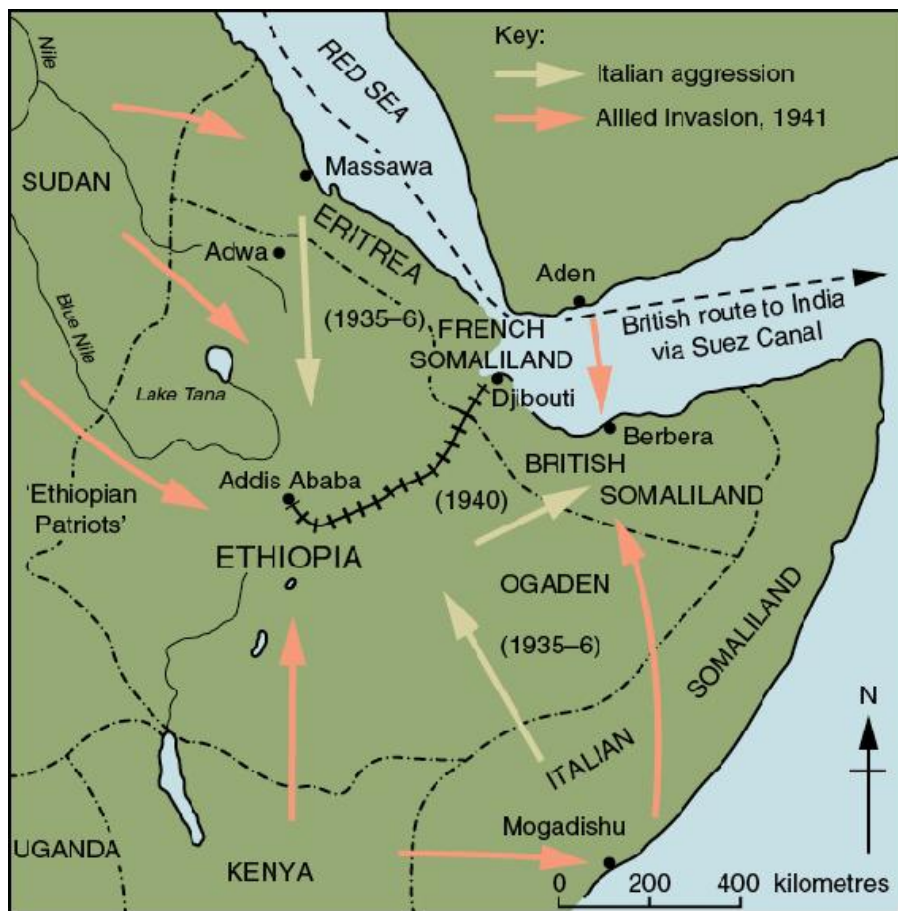


Figure 26.1 In the name of 'progress', the Italians conquered the Ethiopians in 1936 by dropping poison gas from the air, revenge for their humiliation at Adwa in 1896. Although critical of the Italians, as this cartoon from *Punch* (April 1936) shows, the British took no effective action in support of the Ethiopians until Italy declared war on Britain in June 1940.



THE DAWN OF PROGRESS.

"BUT HOW AM I TO SEE IT! THEY'VE BLINDED ME."

Source: © Punch Limited. Reproduced with permission.

Although the Italian army occupied Addis Ababa in May 1936, they never subdued the whole country. Pockets of guerrilla resistance continued throughout the five-year Italian occupation. During this relatively short period, the Italians directed the building of a considerable amount of modern transport infrastructure, but their rule was characterised by a great deal of violence. When an unsuccessful attempt was made to assassinate the Italian Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani in February 1937, for example, Italian reprisals killed up to 6,000 Ethiopians in three days in Addis Ababa alone. Ethiopian sources estimate that, in total, some 30,000 Ethiopians were massacred in

revenge for the attempt on Graziani's life. This strengthened the Ethiopian resistance movement, which was now joined by large numbers of women who had been raped by the Italian army.

Ethiopia and the League of Nations

In June 1936, Haile Selassie went into exile in Europe where he addressed the General Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva. He reminded them of their inaction during the eight months since the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The very purpose of the league, he argued, was to establish the international equality of all member states, and, in particular, to protect the smaller states from aggression by more powerful ones. He warned that 'international morality' was at stake: 'God and history will remember your judgment. ... are States [of the League] going to set up the terrible precedent of bowing before force?'¹ But Britain and France, the major powers of the league (the USA having declined to join), did nothing effective. Ethiopian 'Patriots' had to continue their guerrilla resistance on their own. Nevertheless, they managed to keep some parts of Ethiopia free from Italian control. Meanwhile, Hitler's Germany, encouraged perhaps by the failure of league states to help Ethiopia, followed Mussolini's example by committing numerous acts of international aggression that were eventually to lead to war in Europe in 1939. British policy with regard to Ethiopia did not change until Italy declared war on Britain following the fall of France in June 1940.

The liberation of Ethiopia

During August and September 1940, Italian forces occupied British Somaliland and invaded British-controlled Egypt from their base in Libya. Recently expelled from continental Europe and facing a direct threat to their Suez Canal route to India, Britain finally reacted to Italian aggression in north Africa. By December, the British had pushed the Italians back into Libya and in January 1941 they began the invasion of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie returned to southern Sudan to head a force of Ethiopian Patriots. The British summoned thousands of African troops from Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. The Belgians dispatched a small force of African soldiers from the Congo, while the Free French governor at Brazzaville sent a small contingent from Equatorial Africa. Volunteer forces were sent up from Rhodesia and Nyasaland to join those assembling in Kenya. And from South Africa came a force of 200,000 volunteers, a third of them black. While the

black troops from British east, west and central Africa were armed and provided the bulk of the fighting forces, those from South Africa, as in 1914–18, were not allowed to carry arms.

By May 1941, Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, had been retaken and Haile Selassie re-established on his throne. The British, somewhat reluctantly, recognised Ethiopia's independence, although they remained in occupation of the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Figure 26.2 Abyssinian officers loyal to Emperor Haile Selassie, in traditional dress, in Addis Ababa during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, c.1936.



Source: Keystone/Getty Images.

The Second World War in north Africa, 1941–3



The war in north Africa

In February 1941, Hitler sent the Afrika Korps, an expeditionary force of the German army, to support the Italians in Libya. They forced the British back into Egypt and came within 100 kilometres of Alexandria. The immediate German aim was to seize the Suez Canal and beyond that the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. Before the war began, Hitler had declared that Germany would regain its 'rightful place in the tropical sun'. Thus, as part of his occupation of north Africa, Hitler had longer term plans for striking south across the Sahara, seizing the strategically important French territory of Chad and reoccupying the former German colony of Kamerun, lost in 1916. But his invasion of Russia in 1941 was halted by Russian resistance and he never got the chance to put his Africa plans into action. In western Egypt, the Allied forces finally broke through the German lines at the Second Battle of El Alamein in October 1942. At almost the same time, American and British troops landed in Morocco and Algeria. Attacked from both sides, the Germans and Italians were pushed back to Tunisia. Here, the remnants of Germany's Afrika Korps was forced to surrender in May 1943.

The war on African soil was finally over. The destruction caused in north Africa, especially the urban areas of Tunisia, had been very extensive. Apart from the massive army losses, countless thousands of Libyan and Tunisian civilians lost their lives and homes. From Tunisia, Africans joined British and American troops in the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy in July and September 1943. And African troops from French and British colonies went on to serve with distinction against the Japanese in the forests of Burma and Southeast Asia (Figure 26.3).

The war in French-speaking Africa

On the outbreak of war in Europe, 80,000 regular African troops were

sent from French West Africa to defend French soil from German invasion. Here, they suffered heavy casualties and many were captured and imprisoned by the Germans. On the fall of France in 1940, the colonial officials of French north Africa and French West Africa declared their loyalty to the Vichy government. This effectively took them out of the war for the next two years. The black governor of Chad, on the other hand, Félix Eboué from French Guiana in South America, declared his loyalty to the 'Free French' government in exile. In due course, the governors of the other French equatorial territories followed his example and, for a while, Brazzaville became the capital of 'Free France' in exile. A number of French Equatorial Africans served in the Ethiopian campaign of 1941. At the end of 1942, following the Allied invasion of Vichy north Africa, the colonial authorities of French West Africa abandoned their Vichy allegiance and declared for the Free French government of General de Gaulle. Once more, the Africans of French West Africa supplied soldiers and raw materials for the Allied war effort. At one time, in 1943, Africans from French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa made up more than half of the total of the Free French army.

Figure 26.3 British colonial troops in action on National Highway 1, also known as 'the road to Mandalay', Burma, c.1944. s



Source: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images.

The Jewish population of wartime French north Africa were persecuted by the Vichy government. This probably accounted for the large-scale postwar migration of north African Jews to Israel, before and after 1948.

The impact of the war on Africa and Africans

Manpower and materials

We have already noted the important contribution of African soldiers to the Ethiopian, north African and southeast Asian campaigns. Throughout the war, Africa remained an essential source of men and materials for the Allied war effort. Once Ethiopia had been liberated (in 1941), however, it was more difficult to persuade Africans that they should help the Allied cause. The British officially recruited African soldiers on a volunteer basis and used chiefs as the main recruiting agents. However, recent research has shown that, at times, a considerable amount of pressure was used to 'persuade' Africans to volunteer. Wartime propaganda films, suggesting dire consequences if the war was lost, were shown in villages, and chiefs were urged and

sometimes paid – or bribed – to produce volunteers. The French relied more openly on forced conscription to supply men for the war. Between 1943 and 1945, for instance, over 100,000 soldiers were conscripted from French West Africa.

Africa's importance as a source of raw materials for the Allied armies was greatly increased by the fall of Southeast Asia to the Japanese in 1941–2. Colonial administrators used a mixture of force and persuasion to get Africans to produce more goods for the Allied cause. French West Africans were pressured to produce more groundnuts and cotton. The forest zones of western Africa became the sole Allied source of palm oil. The forced labour of up to 18,000 men was used in the tin mines of Nigeria. Following the loss of the Malayan plantations, the forced collection of wild rubber from the forests of the Congo Basin was reminiscent of the earlier decades of the century. And all over British east, central and southern Africa, village chiefs were required to organise the cultivation of special fields for growing extra food for the war effort.

Before the war, it had been left to the major European merchant companies to control the marketing of African produce and restrict the prices paid to African peasant farmers. During the war, the colonial state moved in to take a more prominent role. All over east, west and central Africa, particularly in the British sphere, colonial authorities set up marketing boards to organise African production for export. At the same time, they used the political power of government to impose official price controls. The argument behind the marketing boards was that they offered African producers a guaranteed price for their produce, and so protected them from the vagaries of world market prices. But it meant that when African palm oil, rubber, sisal, groundnuts, cotton, coffee, tea and cocoa fetched high prices in Europe because of wartime shortage, African producers received no extra benefit. The marketing boards ensured that prices paid to African producers were kept at low fixed rates. Colonial governments were able to pocket the difference and even send subsidies to the Allied war effort. At the same time, with the inflation of manufactured goods from Europe, Africans had to grow more and more export crops just in order to purchase the same amount of imports. The marketing boards were maintained as de facto 'taxation' on African production after the war, and continued on into independence.

Nevertheless, the war did not have a negative impact so far as all African peasant farmers were concerned. It was a period of increasing division between rich and poor peasants, between those who had land and those who did not. Growers of some higher priced crops like cocoa and coffee gained more than growers of cotton or groundnuts.

In addition, there were ways of getting round the restrictive prices of the marketing boards. In Kenya, for instance, where higher priced markets were kept open for European settler farmers, some African peasants were able to smuggle their goods onto the open market and so gain the rewards of higher prices for their produce. Among those who benefited from this were some Kikuyu peasants in the so-called 'white' highland district of central Kenya. Competition for land and markets intensified between Kikuyu and white settlers, with potentially explosive results, as we shall see in [Chapter 27](#).

The commercial and military demands of the Second World War stimulated colonial investment in African harbours and airports on a scale not seen since their initial development of the railways. In a number of west African ports, such as Freetown and Lagos, docks were deepened so as to admit larger vessels, and harbour facilities improved. Freetown became a major port for the Allied command of the south Atlantic. Accra airport became an important terminus for the transportation of Allied troops to the north African battlefield. During this period, more Africans moved into the growing urban centres in search of wage employment, some escaping forced cropping in the rural areas, others attracted by the wages offered in naval harbour construction.

Within the Union of South Africa, the war stimulated a tremendous growth in manufacturing industry. With a shortage of imports from Europe, South Africa began to process their own food, and manufacture their own clothing, chemicals, machinery and tools. The need for Allied shipping repairs gave a great boost to South African steel manufacturing. By 1943, manufacturing had overtaken mining as the largest employer and producer of wealth in South Africa. With increasing land restrictions and poverty in the rural areas, black people were already pouring into the rising manufacturing centres of the Witwatersrand, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. It was a major period of black urbanisation in South Africa, and a time of great opportunities for some. But it was also a time of growing black urban poverty and unemployment, as the numbers seeking work far outstripped the numbers of new jobs available. It was a situation already approaching crisis point when the 200,000 whites and 100,000 blacks serving in Allied armies overseas returned to South Africa after the war.

The political and psychological impact of the war

In the First World War, the colonial powers had used a considerable

amount of force to coerce Africans into supporting their colonists' interests in the war. In the Second World War, on the other hand, while some degree of force was still applied, there was a greater tendency to *encourage* and *invite* African support for the European war effort. Many of the methods of persuasion used would now be defined as blatant misinformation and propaganda. Nevertheless, it marked an important break with the methods of the past. The British, in particular, used films, radio and officially sponsored newspapers to spread wartime propaganda. They sought to *persuade* Africans to cooperate with the colonial authorities, to volunteer for war service or produce more food and raw materials. In seeking to persuade in this way, rather than relying on naked force, colonial authorities were admitting a need to explain their policies and to open a discussion with their African subjects. Literate Africans were quick to respond.

The wartime French and British colonies could no longer ignore the voice of the minority of educated Africans – clerks, teachers, lawyers, clergymen and journalists. They saw their local newspapers and their prewar welfare associations as a means of expressing their opinions and, in particular, their criticisms of many aspects of colonial rule. A number of African-run newspapers had appeared in the 1930s, and their influence grew rapidly in the war years. A single copy of a newspaper would very probably reach a wide audience as it was read aloud at markets and village meeting places far from the major urban centres.

In contrast to their experience of the First World War, Africans were widely informed about the course and issues of the Second World War. The *West African Pilot*, founded in Nigeria in 1938, for instance, published a report on the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. This was an agreement between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which laid out the basic principles of what their governments hoped the war would achieve. Relevant to Africans was the third principle of the charter:

They [the British and US governments] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.

The *West African Pilot* noted critically that Churchill was quick to claim that this principle did not apply to Africa. All over the continent, literate Africans bombarded their local newspapers with letters protesting that the principles of the Atlantic Charter should apply equally to Africa. For the first time, demands for political

independence began to become a dominant theme of emerging African political organisations.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 had shocked Africans and those of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic. Hitherto, Ethiopia had been held up as a symbol of African self-respect and independence from European cultural and political domination: a proud link with Africa's historic roots and ancient cultures. The liberation of Ethiopia by a British-led, but largely African force in 1941 was an inspiration to many Africans: if Ethiopia today, why not the rest of Africa tomorrow? This was the tone of the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester (England) shortly after the end of the war in 1945. The main theme of the congress was an end to colonial rule and political independence for Africa. The timing and means of achieving this were not yet clear, but African delegates such as Nkrumah of the Gold Coast and Kenyatta of Kenya dispersed to their home countries with a clear goal in mind.

Even in the remotest rural regions of Africa, the forced cropping, conscription and inflation of the wartime period served to heighten dissatisfaction with the colonial regimes. Into this atmosphere came the returning ex-servicemen with their vastly broadened view of the world beyond the village and the petty tyrannies of the local colonial magistrate. Previously, the only Europeans most Africans had seen had been wealthy, well educated and in positions of authority. During the war, Africans had worked and fought alongside a wide range of working-class Europeans, and found them little different from themselves. They had fought against and killed Europeans, in the name of the freedom and democracy that they themselves were mostly denied. They had observed European poverty in Europe and European savagery in warfare. Thus, Africans with their range and level of experience would never return to their home countries as a docile and subservient colonial labour force. Few ex-servicemen actually played a significant role in the leadership of the ensuing independence movements. But their influence in undermining the aura and prestige of Europeans in Africa was considerable.

Figure 26.4 De Gaulle addressing a public meeting at the time of the Brazzaville Conference, January 1944. By this time all France's African colonies had declared allegiance to the 'Free French'. The conference, to which no Africans were invited, made declarations in favour of reforming the colonial system, at least in the social and economic sphere; however, political reform leading to self-government was ruled out for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, political reform followed

fairly rapidly from 1945.



Source: Roger Viollet/Getty Images.

The Second World War also helped change the attitude of Europeans themselves towards their colonies in Africa. Allied Europe, especially France, was made acutely aware of its indebtedness to Africa during the war. In order to ensure continuing African support, European administrators had been obliged to promise that social, economic and political reforms would follow Allied victory in the war. At a Free French conference held at Brazzaville in 1944, de Gaulle had specifically promised a 'new deal' for the subjects of the French African territories. Significantly, there were no African delegates at the conference and there was no suggestion yet of African political independence. But the promises of Brazzaville were followed up in 1946 with the abolition of the hated *indigénat* and the *corvée* labour system. In British west Africa, the war years saw educated Africans increasingly being brought into higher administrative positions and onto elected local councils. British colonial administrators began to contemplate a time, in the distant future, when Africans would be allowed some degree of self-government. Significantly, Portugal, which had remained neutral in the war, felt no such obligation to introduce reform in their African colonies.



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SECTION 10



THE OVERTHROW OF COLONIALISM



Chapters 27–29 follow a detailed narrative around the continent tracing the transition of individual countries from colonial rule to political independence. This identifies the modern African countries as

they emerged from colonial rule.

It should first be noted that, from its inception in 1945, the United Nations (UN) established an anti-colonial stance, under pressure from the new superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, both determined shapers of 'world opinion'. This pressure was an important factor pushing the colonial powers towards decolonisation. Postwar colonial governments had no initial plans to decolonise. At most, they felt that they were agreeing to a little local internal self-rule, with all important international issues, economic policy and trade remaining under their firm control. But, by 1945, African expectations had been transformed, especially among the educated élite. No longer satisfied with reforming a system, they turned to demanding the overthrow of the whole deeply humiliating concept of colonial rule. Colonial authorities resisted as long as possible, but the colonial powers were exhausted after the Second World War, and a combination of popular protest and political party agitation brought most to the negotiating table in due course. As will be seen, in retrospect some countries had a relatively smooth transition to independence, although it is important to recognise that even here it probably did not seem smooth to the actors involved at the time.

The main variance in the process of transition depended on whether a particular territory was primarily a colony of European settlement. Where it was, there were local colonists who had built their privileged lives through the advantages they enjoyed under the colonial system and they were determined not to give up without a fight. And, in most cases, a fight was what they got. When constitutional options were closed to them, Africans turned reluctantly to guerrilla warfare. In the Cold War atmosphere of the 1960s and 70s, it was the communist powers of the Soviet Union and China that supplied them with armaments, logistical support and training. Those that achieved independence through this route, such as the Portuguese colonies, were able to impose their own constitution, based on a socialist one-party state. Those that had come to independence through constitutional means were provided with constitutions modelled on those of the colonial powers. These were systems of government that had evolved over time, through conflict and in circumstances peculiar to that particular European country, and not necessarily appropriate to every African situation.

Finally, it should be noted that the 'nationalist' political parties that led African countries to independence were loaded with contradictions. Most were not truly national at all – certainly not in terms of the artificial nation-states, as defined by colonial-era boundaries. Most were based on precolonial identities, or local identities that had evolved during the three generations of colonial

rule. This was inevitable within preliterate society, where the only way an aspiring ‘national’ politician could get electoral support was through being part of the local identity, sharing the local mother tongue. This factor also emphasised the importance of oratorical skills, which lent themselves to crowd-pleasing, emotive and sometimes incendiary positions. It was a situation that was to store up political trouble for the future, as we shall see in Section 11.

CHAPTER 27

The winning of independence (1)

As we saw in [Chapter 26](#), Europe’s dependence on Africa during the Second World War helped change the attitude of Britain and France, the main colonial powers, towards their African colonies. The economic value of the French and British colonies had been clearly revealed and this was reflected in the development strategies for the colonies in the postwar period. A new factor entered the scene from 1945 and this was the United Nations (UN). From its inception in San Francisco in 1945, the UN adopted an anti-colonial stance, under pressure from the new superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, who were now shaping ‘world opinion’. To this was added the voice of the newly decolonising states, notably India (independent from 1947). It soon became apparent to Britain and France, the major colonial powers, that a loosening of external control would be necessary in Africa. In contrast, Belgium and Portugal, the ‘minor’ colonial powers, tried to ignore the trend and had no plans at this stage for any significant changes. The Belgian attempt to catch up in a hurry in 1959 was to have dire consequences for the people of the Belgian Congo.

Colonial development strategies

The British Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945 and their French equivalent, *Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social* 1946, established funds for colonial economic and social investment. Much of the economic investment, however, went directly to sectors already controlled by European colonists; projects such as mining in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, settler farming in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, and mechanised timber felling in Guinea and Gabon. There was little effective investment in African production in the rural areas where most of the population still lived. In Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the British tried to promote a class of African 'master farmers', using modern machinery and the advice of scientific researchers. But the numbers involved were relatively small. Where government tried to organise and improve peasant production on a larger scale, its plans were often ill conceived and unsuccessful.

British investment in extending Sudanese irrigation works increased cotton production on the Djazira scheme between Senna and Khartoum. But French attempts to develop a similar scheme for cotton and rice on the upper Niger failed, largely through lack of proper consultation with the peasant settlers who were supposed to operate the scheme. Similarly, a British groundnut scheme in Tanganyika failed because of insufficient research and lack of forward planning in consultation with local peasant farmers. In Ubangui-Chari (modern Central African Republic), the French resorted to forced labour as they tried to convert the country into a cotton-exporting region, despite enormous transport problems.

Colonial governments were generally too intent on *ordering* and *instructing* rather than *consulting* and *supporting* local African initiatives. With an eye to Europe's needs, colonial postwar economic initiatives were still mainly concerned with developing Africa as an exporter of whatever raw materials best suited the colonial powers, and as an importer of manufactured goods. There was certainly no intention in the late 1940s of developing African self-reliance in preparation for any imminent future economic and political independence from Europe. Nevertheless, with rising demand for African products in Europe, the early 1950s was a boom period for the export of Africa's minerals and agricultural raw materials. But such African peasant prosperity as was achieved in this period was generally *in spite of* government marketing and land use restrictions, *not because of* government investment and involvement.

Despite the shortcomings of colonial economic investment at this

time, an increasing amount of government money was spent on African social welfare. Much of this was in response to the rising demands of African nationalists. For the first time, colonial governments began seriously to invest in expanding African educational and health facilities. New hospitals were built in the main administrative centres, although in the field of health, government's main concern was with disease prevention. Important advances were made in the spraying and control of tsetse fly and malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Most of the educational emphasis was still on primary schooling. Barely 3–4 per cent of Africa's teenagers were attending secondary school by 1960. Nevertheless, there was a need to cater for the growing demand for teachers and higher civil servants. A number of new universities were opened in British East Africa and British West Africa: Ibadan (Nigeria), Legon (Gold Coast/Ghana), Khartoum (Sudan) and Makerere (Uganda). In line with their assimilation policy, the French assumed that Africans seeking higher education would attend universities in metropolitan France.

Politically, the postwar aims of Britain and France were to introduce reforms that would *gradually* lead to African internal self-government, but at a pace determined by the colonial power. It was assumed that the former colonies would remain within the wider French or British empires at least for the foreseeable future, and that Europe's economic domination of Africa would be maintained. But the major colonial powers soon learned that they could no longer dictate the pace of political change in Africa. It was the rising tide of African nationalism that now forced the pace of change and led most African states to political independence by the early 1960s. (The failure of most of these states to achieve effective economic independence will be discussed in [Chapter 30](#).)

As will be seen in the following regional overview, there were, in the French and British colonies, two contrasting routes to independence. In general terms, the greater the number of white settlers, the greater the likelihood of war. In most west African states, for instance, European settlement was minimal. Here, with the notable exception of Portuguese Guinea, colonial authorities responded positively, if at times reluctantly, to African demands for a greater share in their own self-government. By contrast, in colonies of extensive white settlement, such as Algeria, Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, the white settlers themselves intervened to stop the process. As a result, in these colonies, African freedom and independence was only won after prolonged and violent wars of liberation.

The winning of independence in British West Africa

Ghana

The movement of India towards independence in 1947 heralded the break-up of the British Empire. Self-government for Africans could not be far behind. In British West Africa, the movement towards independence was led by the colony of Gold Coast, soon to become the independent state of Ghana. (For the origin of the name 'Ghana', see [Chapter 6](#).) In 1946, the British revised the Gold Coast constitution, establishing an African majority in the legislative council. Most of the African representatives, however, were nominated by the country's chiefs. Although committed to the development of African self-government, the British still believed this could be done by gradual reform of the existing system of 'indirect rule'. This excluded the small but influential body of educated Africans who were determined to win a greater share in government.

In 1947, a number of prosperous businessmen and lawyers from Accra and other coastal towns formed the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). They wanted the revision of the 1946 constitution to increase the number of elected rather than nominated African members of government. Kwame Nkrumah, a former teacher from southern Gold Coast, was invited to become secretary of the new party. Nkrumah ([Figure 27.1](#)) had recently returned from some years of higher education in the USA, where he had been inspired by the ideals of the radical Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey (see [Chapter 26](#)). Nkrumah saw this as the chance to fulfil the aims of the Pan-African Congress of 1945, which he had attended in Manchester (see [Chapter 26](#)).

In February 1948, an incident in Accra quickened the whole tempo of events. Police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration by African ex-servicemen protesting at the rapidly rising cost of living. The shooting prompted widespread rioting in Accra, Kumasi and other towns. The government suspected that the UGCC was behind the disturbances. Nkrumah and leading members of the party were arrested and held in prison for several months. The extent of the disturbances prompted the British government into reviewing the 1946 constitution, which, in turn, demonstrated to Nkrumah the power of mass action. Following his release from prison, Nkrumah founded his own, more radical Convention People's Party (CPP). He pursued a vigorous drive for widespread mass membership with the attractive demand of immediate independence. He called for a campaign of 'positive action' in support of these demands and a wave of demonstrations and strikes swept the country. Nkrumah was

promptly rearrested for subversion. His tactics, however, proved successful.

The British revised the 1946 constitution, bringing in a larger, African-dominated, legislative council. In elections held in 1951, the CPP won a clear majority and Nkrumah was released from prison to become leader of government business in parliament. The 1951 constitution, however, still reserved half the parliamentary seats for chiefly nominees. Nkrumah spent the next three years negotiating with the governor, Charles Arden-Clarke, for a new constitution, which brought fully elected, internal self-government to the territory in 1954. CPP won the new round of elections and Nkrumah became prime minister.

Figure 27.1 Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72), first prime minister and later president of Ghana, 1954–66.



Source: Underwood Archives/Getty Images.

Gold Coast became independent as the new state of Ghana in March 1957. But it was clear that support for CPP, although widespread, was far from universal. An important sector of the population, the cocoa farmers of Asante, resented the way Nkrumah's government had retained the marketing boards that brought in large profits for the government while restricting prices paid to farmers. A regionally based party, known as the National Liberation Movement, had been founded in Asante. They did not trust Nkrumah and the southern Fante, who dominated coastal towns and government. Clearly, serious problems loomed ahead, but, for the moment, Nkrumah's Ghana was an inspiration for African nationalists in the

rest of the continent.

Nigeria

Ghana set the pattern for the transition to independence in the rest of British West Africa. Ghana, however, was a relatively small, compact country with a population of about 5 million in the early 1950s. Nigeria, by contrast, was a large and disunited territory of 35 million people (in 1953). Northern and southern Nigeria had been governed as two separate territories until 1946, and within southern Nigeria there were sharp regional divisions between the Yoruba west and the Igbo-dominated east.

The African nationalist initiative in Nigeria was taken by the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), founded in 1944. Among its founders was Nnamdi Azikiwe, the outspoken editor of the *West African Pilot* ([Chapter 26](#)). Azikiwe sought to make the NCNC a nationwide organisation, although the party's main base of support was in the Igbo country of the southeast. Other regionally based parties followed in 1949, with the formation of the Yoruba Action Group and the (Hausa/Fulani) Northern People's Congress. Independence was delayed as the various parties could not agree on a suitable constitution. Should the country have a single unitary government, should it be a federation of self-governing regional states, or should it split into three or more completely separate states? The conservative Muslim northerners feared domination by the culturally 'Europeanised' southerners. Within the north itself, there was conflict over the continued aristocratic domination of society. Eventually, a federal solution was evolved and Nigeria became independent in October 1960, with northerner Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as prime minister. But the tensions that were to lead to future regional conflict and civil war were already clearly evident.

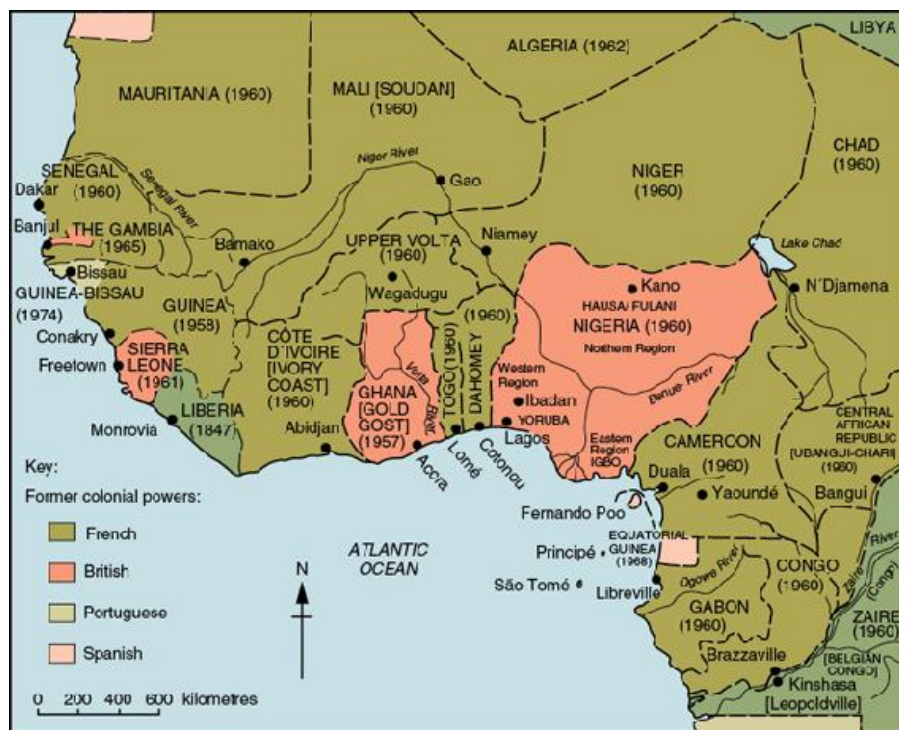
Sierra Leone and The Gambia

Independence for Sierra Leone in 1961 was a victory for the educated élite of the Mende peoples of the interior over the formerly dominant Freetown Creoles. Independence for the tiny state of The Gambia was delayed during discussion over its possible union with its more powerful neighbour Senegal. The Gambia was a product of competition between France and Britain between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and the British remained determined to maintain this, their only presence in this part of West Africa. Britain had promoted The Gambia over two centuries as an 'Anglophone nation'.

Now, the British fostered Gambian fears of losing their identity if they were to form a union with their much larger Francophone neighbour that almost entirely encircled them. Although there were several attempts to form pan-regional unions at this time, Gambian nationalists resisted these moves and the territory became independent in 1965.

More generally, Francophone-Anglophone rivalries were to bedevil regional development throughout the postcolonial period.

Independence in western Africa



The winning of independence in French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa

The French West and Equatorial African territories followed a slightly different route towards political independence. The French were determined from the start to dictate the pace of reform and to keep their African colonies as part of 'Greater France'. The culturally

assimilated African nationalists accepted this in principle but expected to be treated equally with French citizens. It soon became clear that this was not to be the case. Under the reforms of 1946, the French did abolish the hated *indigénat* and *corvée* labour system, while French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa were together allowed to send ten delegates to the French National Assembly in Paris. But this equated to only 2.5 per cent of the seats in the assembly; if they had been treated equally with metropolitan France, the African territories should have been allocated about 50 per cent of the seats on the basis of population.

The African delegates formed a political party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), under the leadership of Félix Houphouët-Boigny from Côte d'Ivoire. Differing regional interests over such a vast stretch of Africa, however, ensured that unity among the various nationalist politicians did not last for long. In 1948, Léopold Senghor, the Senegalese nationalist and poet of the Négritude tradition, broke away from the RDA to found the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (BDS). In 1951, BDS won both Senegalese seats on the French National Assembly.

Figure 27.2 Sir Milton Margai (1895–1964), prime minister of Sierra Leone, arriving at Marlborough House, London for the Commonwealth Premiers Conference, 19 September 1962, the year after Sierra Leone's independence. He was the first Sierra Leonean to qualify as a medical doctor (1926), was elected chief minister in 1954, and was the first prime minister of Sierra Leone from 1956–64.



Source: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images.

The main point of dispute among the African nationalists was about what course to pursue in negotiations with France. Senegal supported the poorer territories like Niger, Chad and Soudan (Mali) in favouring a federal solution. The French West African territories would form one federation and French Equatorial Africa another. Each would then be powerful enough to hold its own in future negotiations with France. In addition, Senghor expected Senegal to be able to dominate the economically weaker partners of French West Africa. Dakar, capital of Senegal and seat of the colonial governors of French West Africa, could expect to remain the capital of such a federation. Houphouët-Boigny, on the other hand, opposed federation, for he

feared that it would lead to Côte d'Ivoire's wealth (from coffee, palm oil and cocoa exports) being used to subsidise the poorer territories of the Sahel.

Under pressure from the Algerian War of Independence (see below), which began in 1954, the French introduced further reforms in West and Equatorial Africa. These led to fully elected, internal self-government for the various territories of the region by 1956. African representation in the French National Assembly was maintained at the same levels, and Félix Houphouët-Boigny joined the French Cabinet in 1956. But France retained control over African military and foreign affairs and economic development planning. It was certainly far short of 'independence'. Furthermore, under the influence of Houphouët-Boigny, the *Loi cadre* (Outline Law) of 1956 ensured that plans for effective African federation were abandoned.

Figure 27.3 Left: Léopold Senghor (1906–2001), poet and philosopher, co-founder of the 1930s Négritude cultural movement and first president of the independent Republic of Senegal, 1960–80. Right: Félix Houphouët-Boigny (c.1905–93), son of a chief and rubber, cocoa and coffee farmer in central Côte d'Ivoire and first president of Côte d'Ivoire, 1960–93. Both leaders are shown together here in the official motorcade during the first Ivorian Independence Day anniversary parade in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, on 10 August 1961.



Source: AFP/Getty Images

As the French came under increasing pressure in Algeria, President

Charles de Gaulle ([Chapter 26](#)), who came to power in 1958, determined to rid himself of the burden of potential future conflict in West and Equatorial Africa. He gave the colonies an ultimatum. Vote *Oui* (Yes) to maintaining the link with France, or vote *Non* (No) to break all links with France and become completely independent. Confronted suddenly with such a stark choice, a majority of French-speaking Africans, while hoping for a greater level of reform, voted for maintaining the link with France. Only Guinea, under the leadership of the trade unionist Sékou Touré, voted *Non* and became immediately independent. France responded by attempting to cripple this ‘rebel’ territory so as to prove to the others the depth of their ‘debt’ to France. All French civil service personnel, economic aid and equipment were withdrawn from Guinea, even down to removing government files and filing cabinets and ripping out office telephones. Guineans serving in the French army were promptly dismissed without their pensions and returned to the streets of Conakry, a potential source of dissatisfaction and unrest. Guinea, however, survived with emergency aid from newly independent Ghana and the Soviet Union. The former soldiers of the French army were usefully employed by Sékou Touré’s government on economic development projects.

With the gathering momentum of the independence movement in British West Africa, the leaders of the other French African territories soon pressed de Gaulle for their own independence. In an attempt to ensure continuing French economic ties with Africa, de Gaulle agreed to their demands and, in 1960, the ‘Year of Africa’, 13 French African territories became independent (see [Map 27.1](#)).

The struggle for independence in the Maghrib

Algeria

In Algeria, the French were determined not to grant independence. It was France’s principal colony of white settlement, there being as many as 2 million French settlers (*colons*) in the country in 1945. That year the Muslim population was fired with a new sense of nationalism. It began in May 1945, when colonial police opened fire on a peaceful Muslim nationalist demonstration in the inland town of Setif. In the rioting and colonial retaliation that followed, 100 Europeans and up to 8,000 Muslims were killed. It was a day of awakening for the people of Algeria. Reforms, such as were hastily offered by the French government in 1946–7, were no longer enough. Increasing numbers of

Algerians became committed to the need for an all-out war of liberation.

The war was launched by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in November 1954. The FLN found its initial base of support in the isolated regions of the Aurès Mountains. In August 1955, the uprising moved to the town of Constantine, where up to 70 European *colons* were killed in a single day. Following this incident, the French realised they were facing full-scale revolution and began to pour tens of thousands of troops into the country from mainland France. The escalation of the war in Algeria played an important role in forcing the French to concede independence in her other African territories.

By 1958, there were up to half a million French troops in Algeria. But each French attempt to suppress the uprising brought more recruits to the liberation armies, although a number of Algerians were recruited to fight for the French. It was a long and bitter struggle. Thousands of French troops were killed and they in turn killed hundreds of thousands of Algerians, most of them noncombatant civilians, accused of helping the guerrillas. The FLN suffered from internal disunity, as each regional command operated virtually independently of the others. Nevertheless, by 1962, their combined efforts had forced the French government to override the protests of the *colons* and negotiate independence.

Independence in the Maghrib

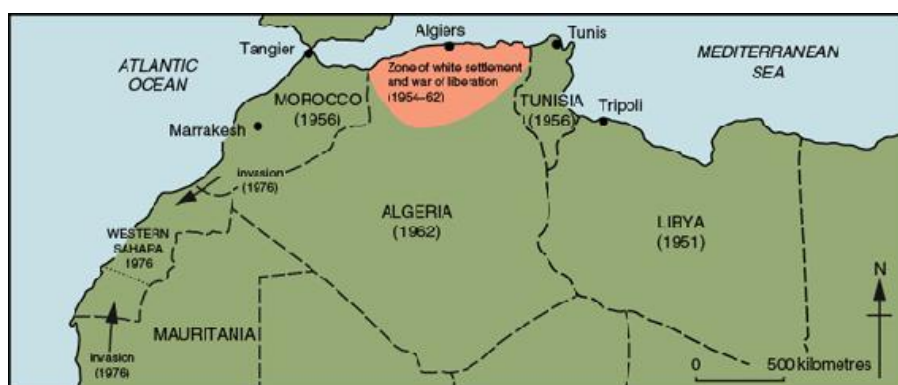


Figure 27.4 FLN soldiers who fought in the Algerian War of Independence, 1954–62.



Source: Universal Images Group/Getty Images.

The first president of the independent republic was Ahmed Ben Bella, a political leader of one of the FLN's principal factions. He had been captured and imprisoned by the French during the war. Now, after independence, he relied heavily on the FLN's armed forces, under the command of Colonel Houari Boumédiène, to enforce national unity. He became so dependent on the support of Boumédiène that the colonel was able to replace Ben Bella in a virtually bloodless coup d'état in 1965. (A coup d'état, or coup, is the overthrowing of a government, by force.)

Morocco and Tunisia

The French had used a form of 'indirect rule' in governing Morocco as a 'protectorate' in the name of the figurehead sultan. In the postwar period, however, Sultan Muhammad V sided with the Muslim nationalist movement, which demanded independence. The French tried to tackle the problem by deposing the sultan and exiling him to Madagascar in 1953. But the tactic rebounded. Muhammad V became a national hero and a Moroccan 'Liberation Army' was founded to fight for independence. By late 1955, the French were feeling the rising pressure of the liberation war in Algeria. In order to concentrate their forces on their major settler colony, the French bowed to the inevitable and agreed to independence in both Morocco and Tunisia. Muhammad V returned to Morocco in triumph, the Tunisian nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba was released from imprisonment,

and both territories became independent in March 1956.

Western Sahara

The Spanish meanwhile continued to occupy their mineral-rich desert colony of Rio de Oro (Western Sahara). In 1976, the Spanish agreed to a withdrawal, allowing the territory of 100,000 people to be partitioned between Morocco in the north and Mauritania in the south. Both countries sent their armies to occupy the coastal regions. The indigenous Arab-Berbers of the desert who had formed the Polisario Front in the early 1970s were determined to resist this further foreign occupation of their country. With military aid from Algeria, the Polisarios waged a bitter guerrilla struggle against Mauritanian and Moroccan occupation. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, but the struggle continued with Morocco. This caused a worsening of relations between Morocco and Algeria and disagreement among the leaders of other African states over whether or not to recognise the Polisario Front as the legitimate government of an independent Western Sahara.

Fighting between Morocco and the Polisario escalated in 1979–81 as first Cuba and then 36 other countries, most of them African, recognised Polisario's Sahara Arab Democratic Republic. International recognition, however, did not help the situation, as Morocco refused to relinquish its claims or withdraw its occupation. In the meantime, Morocco encouraged thousands of Moroccans to take up residence there in anticipation that one day the UN might force a referendum on the territory's future.

Libya

Libya, occupied by the British since 1943, became independent in 1951 with Idris, the leader of the Sanusiyya Sufi brotherhood, as king. Following the discovery of rich reserves of oil in the Libyan Desert in the 1960s, Idris was overthrown by Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi (Gaddafi) in a military coup in 1969. Gaddafi sought to mount a radical Muslim revolution. This involved a wider distribution of Libya's wealth among its Muslim population combined with a return to non-materialist Muslim values, guided by the Qur'an and Gaddafi's own 'little green book' of revolutionary principles. Gaddafi's revolution took the form of a jihad against anti-Muslim forces. He was determined to rid the country of 'western' (European and US) influence and exploitation of the country's mineral resources, and to establish Libya as a major unifying force in the Arab Muslim world.

Some political leaders in northern and trans-Saharan Africa feared that Gaddafi planned to establish a Libyan-dominated grand Muslim empire on the scale of former centuries.

Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia

Egypt

In 1944, Britain ended its wartime occupation of Egypt and the country regained its independence. This allowed the corrupt and oppressive regime of King Farouk and the old Ottoman landed aristocracy to re-establish itself. Farouk was overthrown by military coup in 1952. Army officers had been prompted into action by the recent humiliating Egyptian defeat in the First Arab–Israeli War of 1948–9, the blame for which was laid squarely on the shoulders of Farouk’s government. By 1954, Colonel Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir (usually written in English as Abdul Nasser) had taken over the ruling military council as president of Egypt.

Nasser was of humble origin and was determined to rectify the gross injustices of the Farouk regime. The main issue, one going back for thousands of years, was that of land distribution. Much of Egypt’s precious supply of cultivable land was in the hands of a small number of very wealthy landlords. The vast majority of Egypt’s 20 million population remained landless and desperately poor. Nasser ordered the breaking up of the large estates and the redistribution of land among the peasantry.

Figure 27.5 Abdul Nasser (1918–69) in the early days of the revolution. A colonel in the Egyptian army, he was a leading member of the Council of Revolutionary Command that overthrew King Farouk in July 1952. He became president of Egypt in 1954, and was re-elected unopposed three times, 1956–69.



In 1956, Nasser's government seized the Suez Canal from the French company that owned and operated it. In part, this was a deliberate anti-colonial move against the continuing dominance of France and Britain in the region. But Nasser also intended the profits from the canal to benefit the peoples of Egypt. In particular, he needed funds for his ambitious scheme to raise the Aswan Dam (the original dam having been completed under the British in 1902) in order to increase the amount of irrigable land in the lower Nile valley. Britain and France were determined to seize back control of the canal. Under a secretly prearranged international plot, Israel invaded Sinai. Immediately, Britain and France sent in troops to occupy the canal

zone, supposedly on a peacekeeping mission to keep Egyptian and Israeli troops apart. But the plot failed. All three foreign invading forces were forced to withdraw by a combination of Egyptian resistance and international opposition from the USA and the Soviet Union. Following the humiliating withdrawal of French and British troops in 1956, the Egyptian government nationalised all remaining French and British companies in Egypt. Nasser's victory in the 'Suez War' ended a century or more of western European domination of the Egyptian economy. Egypt under Nasser now became the undisputed leader of the Arab world, even assuming the title 'The United Arab Republic' to reflect a short-lived union between Egypt and Syria (1958–61).

Nasser's triumph over Britain and France in 1956 was to be an inspiration to African nationalists throughout the continent.

Independence in northeast Africa



Sudan

In 1954, Egypt gave up its claim to authority in Sudan, a claim that dated back to the precolonial conquests of Muhammad Ali. Britain then negotiated an independence constitution for Sudan, which came into effect in 1956. It was a hasty arrangement and the problems of internal unity remained unsolved. The British had ruled the Muslim-dominated north and the non-Muslim south as two separate territories for most of the colonial period. After independence, the northerners

began a positive Islamisation campaign in the south as a means of reinforcing national unity. But the non-Muslim southerners regarded rule by the northern Sudanese as no more acceptable than rule by the British. The result was civil war, which, apart from a brief few years in the 1970s, raged from the 1960s until the country was finally and formally separated, by peaceful negotiation, in 2011.

Eritrea

The former Italian colony of Eritrea came under British occupation after 1941. The Muslim Eritreans of the coastal plain favoured complete independence, but their ambitions were thwarted by the intervention of Ethiopia. The government of this landlocked empire saw the period of decolonisation as an ideal opportunity to regain an outlet to the sea. (Massawa had been lost to Turkish occupation in the sixteenth century.) The British responded favourably; keen to build a strong alliance with Christian Ethiopia during a period of rising Arab Muslim power in Egypt and Arabia. The British therefore denied the Eritreans complete independence, preferring to hand the territory over to Ethiopia in 1952 as a self-governing state within an Ethiopian federation. Subsequently, Emperor Haile Selassie denied the Eritreans even this limited level of political independence by annexing Eritrea as a province of Ethiopia in 1962. Muslim and Marxist Eritrean liberation movements soon began an armed struggle against what they regarded as the imperialism of Ethiopia. It was to be 30 years before they finally achieved their independence.

Somalia

Somalia, the country with the greatest ethnic unity, was destined to suffer more division and conflict than almost any other country in Africa, with the notable exceptions of Sudan and the Congo. Divided five ways by colonisation, the predominantly pastoral Somali population found the historic seasonal grazing patterns for their cattle, goats and camels radically restricted. Ethiopia had seized the Somali Ogaden, while the French had occupied the principal northern Somali port (Djibouti). The British had not only taken the northern Somali region opposite the Gulf of Aden, but had also incorporated the valuable southwestern Somali grazing lands into their colony of Kenya as the Northern Frontier District. This left the Italians with the most economically productive southern region that bordered the northwestern Indian Ocean. After the Second World War, the latter became a protectorate under a UN mandate, administered by the

Italians, but committed to independence by 1960.

The main aim of Somali nationalists, both before and after independence, was to achieve the unity of a 'Greater Somalia'. The five-pointed star emblem on their national flag represented the five territories that needed reunification. At independence in 1960, the new Somali Republic incorporated only two of these, British and Italian Somaliland. The decade following independence was dominated by attempts to 'liberate' the other three parts, resulting in destructive border wars with Ethiopia and Kenya. In fact, the Somalis had never historically acted as a single 'nation'. Theirs was an informal cultural unity, with power exercised by local clan leaders with their own local priorities. This was reflected in their democratic politics; in the late 1960s, 1,000 candidates, representing 68 parties, competed for 123 parliamentary seats. The highly personal nature of Somali politics, combined with a lack of development focus, allowed for the early emergence of widespread nepotism and corruption. It was supposedly in an attempt to solve these problems that General Siad Barre staged a bloodless coup in October 1969.

Barre committed his government to 'scientific socialism' and nationalised foreign-owned banks, businesses and land. With Soviet and Chinese financial support, Barre brought a sense of unity, purpose and development to the country, which lasted for a few years. The dream of a Greater Somalia, however, overshadowed all else and attacks into the Ethiopian-occupied Ogaden continued, especially after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Once Brigadier Mengistu had established a Marxist regime in Ethiopia in 1977, however, the Soviet Union switched sides, giving its support to the strategically more significant Ethiopia in the ongoing Ogaden conflict. In a hugely destructive war in the aftermath of drought, Somali troops were expelled from the Ogaden in 1978. At which point, in one of the more cynical moves of the Cold War, the USA threw its weight behind 'socialist' Somalia, supplying Barre's government with massive military aid in exchange for a US military base at Berbera. Meanwhile, the drought of 1974–5 had dealt a devastating blow to Somalia's predominantly pastoral economy, and the country was awash with refugees from the Ogaden.

Siad Barre's rule became steadily more oppressive through the 1980s and a separatist movement grew in the northern region as government development projects were increasingly concentrated in the southern region around Mogadishu. Heavy government retaliation against the north left the city of Hargaise almost destroyed, with tens of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands fleeing as refugees into Ethiopia. By 1990, Barre's oppression throughout the country had

provoked such opposition that people reverted to old clan-based loyalties. In January 1991, Barre fled the country, leaving behind chaos and national disintegration.



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CHAPTER 28

The winning of independence (2)

British East Africa

Tanzania (Tanganyika and Zanzibar)

British East Africa was a region of contrasts so far as the route to independence was concerned. The lead was taken in Tanganyika. The event that spurred Tanganyikan nationalists into mass political activity was the eviction in 1951 of thousands of Meru farmers to make way for a handful of white settlers. Following protests against this action by the Tanganyikan African Association, Julius Nyerere led Tanganyikan nationalists in forming the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) in 1954.

Nyerere ([Figure 28.1](#)) had been educated at the new University of Makerere in Uganda and at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He quickly turned his organisational talents to making TANU a countrywide political party, modelled on Nkrumah's CPP. He was helped by the extent of rural dissatisfaction with heavy-handed government attempts to change and 'improve' the agricultural practices of peasant farmers. Government schemes to enforce the terracing of mountain slopes, for instance, provoked violent rioting in 1955. The rapid spread of TANU membership was also helped by the widespread use of the Kiswahili language in Tanganyika. Kiswahili had become the language of long-distance trade in the precolonial period. Throughout the colonial period, Kiswahili was used by missionaries and officials in their schools and civil service because they found it more convenient to learn and use just one 'native' language. Thus, an African language was available to Nyerere that could be used to help create a sense of national unity among the many African peoples of the territory.

For a while, the British tried to establish what they called a ‘multiracial’ constitution. In fact, it was a racist constitution that guaranteed a powerful say in government for the tiny minority of Asians and Europeans. The British were influenced in their attitude by their attempts to uphold more extensive white settlement in neighbouring Kenya. But under Nyerere’s leadership, TANU won the support of a number of influential white settler politicians. As a result, TANU won a clear majority in the parliamentary election of 1958, even under the terms of the ‘multiracial’ constitution. By the end of 1961, Tanganyika had become independent under a totally non-racial constitution.

The British conceded independence to Zanzibar in December 1963, but the island state remained under Arab domination with the sultan still as head of state. Within weeks of independence, the sultan’s regime was overthrown in a violent revolution on behalf of the long-oppressed African majority. In April 1964, Tanganyika and Zanzibar amalgamated into the Republic of Tanzania.

Uganda

Nyerere’s Tanganyika (Tanzania) provided a lead that inspired the nationalist movements in the rest of British east and central Africa. In Uganda, however, political unity in opposition to colonialism was not so easily achieved as it was in Tanganyika. During the colonial period, the British had treated the ‘kingdom’ of Buganda as though it were a distinct unit within the Protectorate of Uganda. At the same time, the British use of ‘indirect rule’ had emphasised the continuing role of the *kabaka* (king) in Baganda political life. Kabaka Mutesa II was determined to retain Buganda’s special status in any future independent Ugandan state. Under the terms of the independence constitution of 1961, Buganda was allowed to exercise its own internal self-government, separate from central government and under the direct control of the *kabaka*.

Figure 28.1 Julius Nyerere (1922–99). *Mwalimu* (teacher), political philosopher, international statesman, he was elected chief minister of Tanganyika in 1960 and became prime minister of independent Tanganyika in December 1961. He resigned during 1962 to work on a new constitution and was elected president of the Republic of Tanganyika in 1962. He negotiated union with Zanzibar in 1964, and thus became president of the Republic of Tanzania, 1964–85, when he became one of the few African presidents of his generation to retire from office.



Source: Fox Photos/Getty Images.

The government that took Uganda to independence in October 1962 was a political alliance between Milton Obote's northern-based Uganda People's Congress and the Buganda royalist party, the Kabaka Yekka ('King Alone') movement. Obote (Figure 28.2) became prime minister and the following year Kabaka Mutesa was installed as ceremonial president. Support for Obote's party strengthened after independence and he was soon able to dispense with his political alliance with the Buganda royalists. In April 1966, Obote declared a new constitution in which he himself became executive president. The special status of Buganda ended violently the following month when government troops attacked the *kabaka's* palace. The palace was destroyed and many of its inhabitants were killed, although Mutesa

himself managed to escape into exile. The military commander who led the brutal attack was Colonel Idi Amin, who was later to oust Obote himself in a military coup in January 1971.

Kenya

The road to independence in Kenya was a rough one. White settlers from the central highlands dominated the colonial government in Nairobi. The story of the road to Kenya's independence tends to be dominated by the uprising known as 'Mau Mau'. The exact origin of the words 'Mau Mau' remain obscure, with many conflicting theories, but it is most commonly associated with secret Gikuyu oath-taking ceremonies. The dominant role of the uprising, however, should not be allowed to distract from the other movements that were struggling against the injustices of the colonial regime. Several local welfare associations had been formed in the 1920s and these were taking on a political hue by the late 1930s and 40s. In the postwar years, however, the development of nationwide political parties was prevented by a 'state of emergency' declared over the Mau Mau Uprising in 1952. It was not until the uprising was effectively defeated in 1956 that Kenyans began to be allowed to proceed along more 'normal' routes to political representation, although the state of emergency remained in force until 1959. During that period of colonial repression, the nationalist flame was kept alive by the charismatic trade unionist Tom Mboya.

Independence in east Africa



The main support for Mau Mau had come from African ‘squatter’ tenants, mostly Gikuyu, but including Embu and Meru, who had been expelled from white-owned farms in the fertile highlands north of Nairobi. The white settlers sought to prevent their African ‘squatter’ tenants from becoming successful peasant farmers who might compete with the white ‘farmers’ themselves. They wanted to ensure that the only Africans remaining in the fertile ‘white highlands’ were those who were entirely dependent on white ‘farmers’ for their very low wages. Large numbers of Gikuyu ‘squatters’ had been evicted from the highlands in the 1930s. Many had been pushed into dry, infertile resettlement areas or overcrowded ‘reserves’. Others had abandoned the struggle to remain on the land and moved to the expanding urban

centre of Nairobi in search of work, or the easier pickings of petty crime.

Figure 28.2 Milton Obote (1925–2005). Founder of the Uganda People's Congress, he became prime minister of independent Uganda in 1962; he abrogated the constitution and declared himself president of the Republic of Uganda in 1966. He was exiled by Idi Amin's coup in 1971, re-elected president in 1980 and exiled by coup again in 1985.



Source: Fox Photos/Getty Images.

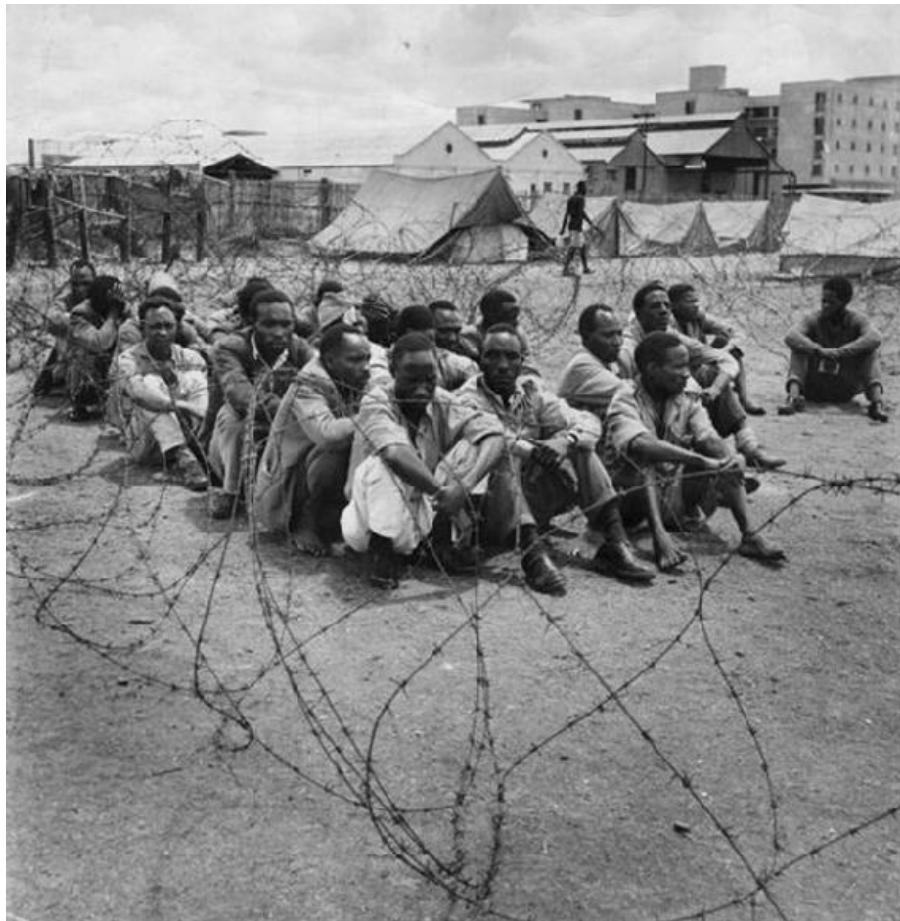
The Mau Mau struggle began in the early 1940s with a campaign of violent rural action, which included labour strikes, setting fire to farm buildings and crops, and the maiming of livestock. By the late

1940s, their action had become more organised with the 'Land and Freedom Army' introducing secret ('Mau Mau') oath-taking ceremonies to enforce unity and loyalty to the cause. The aim of the campaign was not to engage the colonial government in full-scale war, but to frighten the settlers into abandoning their farms, and ultimately leaving the country. Only then, they believed, could political freedom be achieved. To rural Gikuyu, 'political freedom' meant an end to oppressive land and labour laws and a radical redistribution of white-owned land.

The conflict accelerated during 1952 with a series of attacks on white settlers themselves and also on African chiefs who were seen as collaborators with the colonial regime. In October, the colonial governor declared a state of emergency. A hundred known African political leaders were arrested and British forces were flown in from abroad. But Mau Mau was a grassroots movement that had developed out of severe oppression in the so-called 'white highlands'. It was not, as colonial authorities assumed, a movement invented and led by African nationalists in Nairobi, although their ultimate aims were similar and some nationalist party members had sworn the Mau Mau oaths. The arrest of African nationalist leaders did not end the struggle. The Mau Mau freedom fighters, however, were forced back to the Aberdare forests from where they fought a defensive war for the next three years.

Severe government anti-Gikuyu oppression deprived the fighters of more widespread support as thousands of potential rural sympathisers were rounded up and forced into concentration camps. Total Mau Mau casualties probably exceeded 10,000. As usual in African colonial conflicts, Africans bore the brunt of frontline casualties on the government side. Some 1,700 African 'loyalists' died, while barely 100 Europeans were killed. British use of torture and the abuse of prisoners in the camps was commonplace; British written evidence of which was concealed for more than 50 years. Only uncovered in a British government building in 2005, these documents enabled a few elderly Kenyan survivors to pursue legal action in the British High Court in London (see box on the 'end of empire' myth later in this chapter).

Figure 28.3 Arrested Mau Mau suspects held by police in Nairobi, Kenya, 1952.



Source: Bert Hardy/Stringer/Getty Images.

Although the Mau Mau freedom struggle had technically been defeated by the end of 1955, for Kenyans as a whole, the war won the possibility of major political reform. In the first place, it persuaded the British government to abandon the extreme demands of the local white settlers whose oppressive laws had clearly provoked the crisis. By 1960, the British had accepted the principle of African majority rule for a self-governing Kenya.

Before the outbreak of Mau Mau, the African nationalist movement in Kenya had been led by Jomo Kenyatta ([Figure 28.4](#)), a former secretary of the Kikuyu Central Association, who had recently returned from some years in Britain. In 1947, Kenyatta became president of the newly formed Kenya African Union (KAU), which began pressing for political reform and independence. As an outspoken opponent of the government, Kenyatta was one of those imprisoned under the state of emergency in 1952. With the lifting of the state of emergency in 1959 and the British acceptance of the

principle of majority rule in 1960, nationalist political parties could again be formed. Two main parties emerged: the Kenya African National Union (KANU), which emerged out of KAU, and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). The former was founded by Oginga Odinga and the influential trade unionist Tom Mboya (Figure 28.5). Among KADU's founders was Daniel arap Moi, future Kenyan president. Kenyatta was released from prison in 1961 to become president of KANU and leader of the African majority in the legislative assembly. After further constitutional negotiation, Kenya finally became independent in December 1963.

Figure 28.4 Jomo Kenyatta (c.1894–1978). Known as *Mzee* ('the Old Man'), he was general secretary of the Kikuyu Association in the 1920s, campaigned in Europe for the restoration of Kikuyu (Gikuyu) land, 1929–46, and published *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). Imprisoned during the state of emergency, 1952–61, he was prime minister of independent Kenya, 1963–4, and president of the Republic of Kenya, 1964–78.



Source: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images.

Figure 28.5 Tom Mboya (1930–69). General secretary of the Kenya Federation of Labour, 1953–62, he was the leading Kenyan nationalist politician during the 1950s' 'state of emergency', and later served as a minister in Kenyatta's government, from 1963 until his assassination in 1969.



Source: Ira Gay Sealy/The Denver Post/Getty Images.

The assassination of Tom Mboya

Tom Mboya (1930–69), a popular trade union leader, emerged as a leading figure in Kenyan nationalist politics during the 1950s. Although a key political ally of Jomo Kenyatta and a member of his cabinet, Mboya – a Luo – was also seen as a strong candidate to succeed to the presidency after Kenyatta, a Kikuyu. Mboya was assassinated on 5 July 1969. On his arrest, Mboya's Kikuyu assassin said: “Why don't you go after the big man?” He was tried, convicted and executed within four months. There was no

judicial inquiry or other attempt to clarify exactly who or what he meant by ‘the big man’, or whether there was anybody else involved behind the scenes;¹ but there is no doubt that the assassination poisoned the political relationship and trust between Luo and Kikuyu, stacking up trouble for the future.

regional organisations, drawing their main support from single ethnic groups. The most prominent of these was the Bakongo cultural organisation ABAKO (Alliance des Bakongo), under the leadership of Joseph Kasavubu. In the Katangan copper-producing region, the principal party was CONAKAT (Confédération des associations tribales du Katanga), founded by Moïse Tshombe and based mainly on Lunda support. Only the MNC (Mouvement National Congolais), founded by Patrice Lumumba, made any determined effort to create a nationwide political party. Even the MNC, however, was dependent for most of its support on the peoples around Lumumba's home town of Kisangani (Stanleyville), capital of Orientale Province (see [Map 28.2](#)).

During 1958, these aspiring African politicians quickly transformed their local interests into demands for political independence. Most of them indicated a fairly generous timescale: from 1961 to 1965 for independence. They were strongly influenced by events elsewhere in Africa, especially the granting of self-government to the peoples of French Congo-Brazzaville just across the river from the Belgian colony. In December 1958, Lumumba attended the All-African People's Conference in newly independent Ghana and returned to the Congo inspired by the 'independence fever' that was generated at the conference. The political rallies that followed in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in January 1959 quickly degenerated into widespread and uncontrolled rioting, particularly by unemployed youths in the country's main towns. Attacks were concentrated mainly on government buildings, Catholic missions and European-owned property.

Problems of historical interpretation

The traditional interpretation of the events surrounding Congo's independence, including in the earliest editions of this book, has been faced with a radical reinterpretation in the light of new evidence hitherto unavailable to the general public. The traditional version of events can be summarised as follows.

Faced with a general breakdown of law and order throughout the country in 1959, the Belgian government panicked, fearful of provoking an Algerian-type war of liberation. Having only officially legalised African political parties in August 1959, the Belgians summoned the colony's main political leaders to a Round Table Conference in Belgium in January 1960. Lumumba, who had been imprisoned since November 1959 on charges of inciting violence, was released to enable him to attend. African politicians later admitted that they had been prepared to negotiate anything up to a five-year

transition period towards internal self-government. To their surprise, the Belgians agreed to full political independence within less than six months. Totally unprepared, political parties mushroomed throughout the country: 120 different parties contested the parliamentary elections for 137 seats in May 1960. So long oppressed by poverty, forced labour, heavy taxation and racial discrimination, the Congolese electorate were swept away by the wildest of expectations for the coming independence, expectations that could not possibly be met.

The problems of regionally based parties quickly came to the fore in the negotiations to form a coalition government for independence on 30 June. Only Lumumba's MNC favoured a single centralised government. The other, regional parties wanted a federal constitution that would guarantee them domination of their own local self-government. With the style of constitution still undecided, Lumumba headed a very shaky coalition as prime minister, with Kasavubu as formal president. Within days, the newly independent state began to fall apart. The army mutinied against the continued presence of Belgian officers and Katanga declared itself a separate state.

Independence in the Congo (Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo)



Lumumba's government was paralysed. It had lost its main source of income, taxes from the Katangan copper mines, and control of the army with which to enforce the law. Into the chaos that now ensued, the United Nations (UN) sent a peacekeeping force. But, under pressure from the USA, the UN peacekeeping force refused to intervene against Katangan secession. Sometime between November 1960 and January 1961, Lumumba was murdered in Katanga. Meanwhile, General Mobutu, the army commander, was, with strong US backing, emerging as the main power behind a series of shaky governments in Kinshasa.

The reality of independence and neocolonialism

The lesson of this traditional version of events was that the Congolese were not ready for independence. The Belgians' fault was that they had not prepared the Congolese for political power over a longer period, or that they should have delayed the process for a number of

years. Recent historical research, however, has turned this version on its head. The historical revision has been led by Ludo De Witte, a Belgian writer whose work was based on access to the UN archives in New York, Belgian government archives and the memoirs by key Belgian figures of the time.¹ From this research, a very different story emerges.

Historians challenge the benign 'end of empire'

With more than fifty years having passed since the ending of colonial rule in most African countries, the government archives of the colonial powers are gradually being opened to the scrutiny of historians and other researchers. De Witte's exposure on the truth behind the decolonisation of the Belgian Congo is a product of this. One never knows, however, whether files have been held back, or even destroyed. On the eve of independence, it was common practice for colonial officials to be ordered to destroy compromising files or spirit them out of the country.

In the case of Kenya, a huge quantity of records (perhaps as many as a quarter of a million files) dealing with the Mau Mau insurgency and the colonial response to it were shipped back to Britain and locked away in a secure storage facility. In 2005, however, Caroline Elkins, an American academic, published a book that revealed the existence of these hidden files and that they contained evidence of the widespread British use of torture in the suppression of the uprising.¹ This enabled a group of aged Kenyan victims to prosecute the British government in London. Eventually, the British government was forced by the court to acknowledge the existence of these documents and to start transferring them to the British National Archives for availability to public scrutiny. The case ended in 2013 with the British government offering an apology for the use of torture and paying compensation to the surviving Kenyan victims.²

The Belgian government's sudden move to independence was not at all a panic move, but rather a deliberate attempt to forestall the build-up of a radical agenda among Congolese nationalists. The Belgians believed that if they moved quickly, they would be able to keep control of the government behind the scenes, primarily *because* the Congolese politicians were so inexperienced. It was believed that even the radical nationalist figure of Lumumba could, in practice, be contained and manipulated. Shortly before the May 1960 general election in the Congo, the Belgian government changed the Congolese constitution to allow the six provincial governments virtually complete autonomy. This was a deliberate safeguard so that in the event of the central government falling into the 'wrong' hands, such as those of Lumumba, the richest province of Katanga would be able to act independently, and even secede. Within Katanga, Belgian settlers and officials had joined Tshombe's CONAKAT and had even drafted the party's manifesto. Tshombe was to prove a willing tool of Belgian interests.

At the independence ceremony on 30 June 1960, King Baudouin of Belgium made a paternalistic speech referring to Belgium's noble 'civilising mission' and praising his predecessor, Leopold II (see [Chapter 22](#)) as a genius. He urged the incoming government not to indulge in 'hasty reforms', but rather to heed the advice of their Belgian administrators and technocrats. This anticipated a 'neocolonial' future for the Congo: the colonial system of economic exploitation would remain, with minimal change, apart from a small élite of African politicians as figureheads at the top. Lumumba, however, defied protocol and replied with a radical speech that castigated the brutality and injustice of Belgian rule. He declared the Congolese people finally free from 'the humiliating slavery that was imposed on us by force'. Some have argued that this speech sealed Lumumba's fate. De Witte, however, believes that it was not so much the speech that condemned him in Belgian eyes – politicians say many things to gain popularity – but rather the fact that he followed it up a few days later with action to implement his promises.

When the army mutinied (5 July), an event De Witte refers to as a 'strike', Lumumba intervened on the side of the soldiers, dismissed the Belgian senior officers and asked the African soldiers to put forward their own choice of officers as replacements. Lumumba appointed Joseph-Désiré Mobutu as army chief of staff. Mobutu, a former soldier and self-taught journalist, had been Lumumba's secretary at the Brussels Conference. In Katanga, Belgian officers refused to accept dismissal, and when Congolese soldiers rebelled against their defiant Belgian officers, the Belgian government sent in paratroopers to

disarm them (10 July). Tshombe, now under the protection of Belgian forces, felt free to proclaim Katanga's independence from central government (11 July 1960). Immediately, the Union Minière paid Tshombe's government a year's worth of taxes in advance, to ensure the state's financial viability. Further Belgian troops were flown in to secure the other major Congolese cities in the days that followed (including the capital, Leopoldville, on 13 July). They came ostensibly to protect Belgian property and civilians, subject to attack during the initial mutiny of 5 July.

When Lumumba appealed to the UN for help against this external aggression, which he regarded in effect as an attempted recolonisation, he got no sympathy or support. On the UN Security Council, the USA and Britain supported the Belgian cause and distrusted Lumumba as being likely to promote a socialist transformation of the country. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld concurred, and thus the UN troops that arrived in the Congo in August 1960 had a mandate merely to help restore 'law and order'. Although the Belgians were persuaded to withdraw and hand over to the Blue Berets (the nickname of the UN peacekeepers), the UN made no attempt to remove the Belgians from Katanga, or end that province's secession. Indeed, when elements of the Congolese army loyal to Lumumba tried to end the secession, UN troops provided a barrier to prevent them entering Katanga.

Figure 28.6 Ghanaian UN troops in the Congo 1961.



Belgian plans, supported by the USA and the UN secretary-general, were to undermine and destroy Lumumba's nationalist government and they were prepared to use Katangan secession as a means to achieve that. Rather than reincorporate Katanga into the rest of the Congo, the Belgians aimed to reclaim their Congolese holdings and rebuild the Congo as a neocolonial state from their base in Katanga. The major obstacle to Belgian and US plans was Lumumba. By this time, the USA, Britain and Belgium were all agreed that Lumumba, the democratically elected prime minister, should be removed, permanently. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) persuaded President Kasavubu to dismiss the prime minister, whereupon Mobutu, acting by this time for the CIA, dismissed the elected parliament and placed Lumumba under house arrest on 5 September 1960. The UN stood by and did nothing to protect Lumumba, even when he was transported to Katanga in December 1960. On 16 January 1961, Lumumba and two of his closest aides were shot by firing squad, with the full approval of Tshombe and in the presence of three Belgian officers.

Katangan secession lasted two-and-a-half years. It was supported and financed by the Belgian controllers of the Union Minière copper-mining company and other Belgian business interests in the region. Tshombe's Katangan military force was assisted by a motley crew of white mercenaries made up of former Belgian soldiers and adventurers from Rhodesia and South Africa. It was not until towards the end of 1962 that the UN finally intervened decisively in Katanga and ended Tshombe's secession in January 1963. Ironically, for a while during 1964-5, Tshombe himself became prime minister of the newly unified Congo government. But Tshombe's rule was soon discredited, partly for corruption and finally for his use of white mercenaries and American and Belgian paratroopers during the suppression of a major rebellion in the Lumumbist heartland of Kisangani.

Mobutu's coup d'état and the Republic of Zaïre

In November 1965, General Mobutu finally seized power in a bloodless coup d'état. The only surprise was that he had not done so earlier. He had, perhaps, needed the intervening time to consolidate his hold over the redisciplined army. Mobutu re-established strong central government control, helped by a temporary but rapid rise in the international price of copper. The old discredited politicians were gradually squeezed out as Mobutu established his own very personal style of presidential government. In the early 1970s, in a move to

symbolise a new beginning, the province of Katanga was renamed Shaba, while the name of the country itself was changed to Zaire.

Rwanda and Burundi

Belgium ruled Rwanda and Burundi as the joint territory of Ruanda-Urundi under a League of Nations/UN mandate, having taken over the two former kingdoms from the Germans in 1919. In contrast to the Belgian Congo, the Belgians were under obligation to the Trusteeship Council to prepare the two countries, separately, for internal self-government. Thus, during the 1950s, political activity was allowed and numerous political parties were formed.

As seen in [Chapter 14](#), in precolonial times ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ were social and economic terms rather than ethnic distinctions as such. Hutu meant ‘peasant’ or ‘servant’, while Tutsi, originally meaning ‘pastoralist’, had, by the eve of colonisation, come to be equated more generally with wealth and status – of which cattle ownership was often an important part. German and Belgian colonisers hardened these flexible terms into rigid ethnic identities, enshrined in law and recorded on every person’s identity document. They recorded and promoted Tutsi myths of distant origin, transmuting them into historical fact and confirmation of Tutsi superior racial identity. After two generations of colonial rule, these distinctive Tutsi and Hutu identities were widely accepted and entrenched in people’s minds. Thus, those identified as Tutsi were a small privileged élite that was co-opted as a junior partner in colonial rule. The majority, classified as Hutu, were a subservient underclass, subject to forced labour demands and with less access to education or social privileges. This colonial legacy, which defined the whole of society in terms of ethnicity, was to harden with political independence into bitter ethnic enmity and conflict.

In Rwanda, political parties were ethnically based from the start. The Tutsi élite demanded immediate independence in order to preserve their privileged dominant position. Newly emerging Hutu intellectuals, led by Gregoire Kayibanda, demanded that majority rule should precede independence. Amid mounting inter-ethnic violence, the Belgians, anticipating the numerical power of the Hutu majority if once unleashed, changed tack and backed the Hutu intellectuals, replacing many Tutsi chiefs with Hutu nominees. The latter organised a general persecution of Tutsi, rich or poor, regardless of their élite or common status. Persecution turned into a series of massacres between November 1959 and October 1960 that has been described as a Belgian-sponsored revolution. Hundreds of Tutsi were killed and tens

of thousands were driven into exile in Burundi, Tanganyika and Uganda. During 1961, small bands of Tutsi exiles – whom the Hutu referred to as *inyenzi*, ‘cockroaches’ – began to launch attacks from neighbouring Uganda.

It was against this background that Kayibanda led the PARMEHUTU (‘Parti de l’émancipation du peuple Hutu’) to electoral victory in 1961. He became president of the independent republic of Rwanda the following year. Kayibanda, however, added regionalism to ethnicity and packed his government with Hutu from central Rwanda, to the exclusion of those from the north. In 1973, he was ousted in a coup staged by Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu from northern Rwanda. The continued conflict and subsequent genocide of the 1990s will be discussed in [Chapter 32](#).

In Burundi, by contrast, the widely respected leadership of King Mwambutsa IV (1915–66) established a level of non-partisan cooperation between Hutu and Tutsi that was enshrined within the most prominent political party UPRONA (Union pour le progrès nationale). It was founded in 1958 by the king’s son, Louis Rwagasore, but the latter’s assassination in October 1961 unleashed pent-up ethnic tensions. Fearful of the massacres of Tutsi that had occurred in Rwanda during 1959–60, the Burundian Tutsi leadership purged many Hutu from UPRONA and ensured that it was a predominantly Tutsi government that took the country to independence in 1962. A military coup in 1966 further strengthened Tutsi control, purged Hutu from state employment and set the pattern of military rule, massacre and rebellion that has dominated Burundi since independence.

Independence on the islands

Réunion

Réunion became a *département* of France in 1946, with the right to send representatives to the French National Assembly. This secured the sugar plantation economy firmly in the hands of French companies. Since then, dissatisfaction with Réunion’s high levels of unemployment has been muted by financial subsidies from France, including social security and unemployment payments. With this high level of economic dependence, there have been no widespread demands for political independence.

Mauritius

The British took Mauritius from the French in 1810. After the abolition of slavery in 1834–5, the former slaves, of African descent and known in Mauritius as Creoles, left the sugar plantations en masse. This prompted the British authorities to import indentured labour from India to work the sugar plantations. Over the next 50 years, tens of thousands of Indians arrived in Mauritius, transforming the ethnic makeup of the population to the extent that, by the early twentieth century, people of Indian descent (mostly Hindu) made up two-thirds of the population. It was from this rural Hindu working class that the Mauritius Labour Party, founded in 1936, drew its main support. As the Labour Party, under the leadership of Dr Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, pushed for independence in the 1950s and early 1960s, they were vociferously opposed by a largely Creole-supported PMSD (Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate), who feared independence would expose them to ‘Hindu domination’. They preferred to retain a Réunion-style link with Britain. Ramgoolam, however, skilfully steered the country through a difficult decade, marred by inter-ethnic violence, to win a series of elections and achieve independence from Britain in 1968.

Madagascar

The Malagasy never really came to terms with foreign occupation by the French. While open resistance to conquest was suppressed in the decade before the First World War, secret societies were formed during the interwar years to keep alive nationalist aspirations. French assimilation policies co-opted only a very small pliant minority of Malagasy into the colonial system. The decision by the colonial administration to support the French Vichy government in 1940 (see [Chapter 26](#)) led to a British and ‘Free French’ occupation of Madagascar in 1942. This serious blow to French colonial prestige encouraged Malagasy nationalists, whose cause was strengthened further by wartime food shortages, especially rice, leading to famine in 1943–4.

In line with other French African colonies, in 1946 indigenous Malagasy gained the right to elect two delegates to the French National Assembly. These two, Joseph Raseta and Joseph Ravoahangy, founded the MDRM (Mouvement démocratique pour la rénovation malgache), but their demand in Paris for immediate independence was rejected. Meanwhile, French settlers tried to suppress the rising tide of Malagasy nationalism in the island. MDRM leaders were arrested and workers who were believed to sympathise with the party were ill-treated or sacked. Few were surprised when

the 'Great Rebellion' broke out on 29 March 1947. In the initial months of the rebellion, several hundred Europeans and their Malagasy 'collaborators' were killed as rebels seized control of eastern parts of the country. Over the following year, however, the French suppressed the rebellion with ruthless brutality, leaving at least 90,000 killed.

Despite the failure of armed rebellion, the spirit of Malagasy nationalism lived on. In 1953, the Catholic Church gave official support to aspirations for independence, hoping to forestall the spread of communism. A new wave of political activity began with the French move to allow internal self-government in its African colonies in 1956. In Madagascar, a new 'moderate' strand of nationalism came to the fore in the form of the PSD (Parti Social Démocrate) under the leadership of Philibert Tsiranana. The PSD campaigned successfully to remain within a 'French Union' in the referendum of 1958, and along with the other French tropical mainland colonies, Tsiranana led the country to independence in 1960.

Comoros

The Comoro Islands are peopled primarily by Muslim Swahili speakers, with only the island of Mayotte having a significant population of Malagasy Christians. There was no particular demand for independence from France until the violent French suppression of a school strike in 1968. In 1974, following a series of referenda, the islands voted for independence, although the French claimed that the island of Mayotte had voted to remain part of France. In July 1975, Ahmed Abdallah, leader of the Union Démocratique des Comores declared the Comoros independent, with himself as its first president. In December 1975, the French recognized the independence of Grand Comore, Anjouan and Moheli, but continued to insist that Mayotte remain part of the French 'territorial community'. By then Abdallah had been overthrown by Ali Soilih, who expelled all French nationals. He, in turn, was overthrown in 1978 by Bob Denard, a notorious French mercenary, who invited Abdallah to return as president.

Seychelles

The movement towards independence in Seychelles began in 1964 with the formation of the islands' two principal political parties. The SDP (Seychelles Democratic Party), led by James Mancham, a lawyer and son of a wealthy trader, favoured continued ties with Britain. The SPUP (Seychelles People's United Party) was led by France-Albert

René, a lawyer and trades union organiser who sided with the interests of the poor, and quickly came to believe that radical social transformation could only be achieved through complete independence from Britain. The British, however, were not prepared to follow the French example and told Mancham that if he wanted to secure his country from René's socialism, he had better campaign for independence. Elections in the 1970s showed the two parties fairly evenly matched. René's radical social programme got him the financial support of the Liberation Committee of the Organisation of African Unity (see [Chapter 31](#)). Mancham, by contrast, drew considerably larger financial support from the USA and local landowning and business interests. The USA and Britain saw the islands of the Indian Ocean as of strategic importance in the Cold War. In the 1960s, Britain had leased the Chagos Islands (to the west of Seychelles) to the USA to build a military air base on Diego Garcia. They also leased a site on Seychelles' main island of Mahé for the USA to build a satellite tracking station, to keep an eye on their own satellites and to spy on those of the Soviet Union.

The British, hoping to rein in René's socialism, persuaded the two parties to form an alliance in 1975 in preparation for independence the following year, at which point Mancham became executive president with René as prime minister. It was an uneasy alliance: Mancham believed the future of the islands lay in luxury tourism and providing an offshore tax haven for his millionaire friends, while René wanted a socialist revolution. In June 1977, less than a year after independence, René staged a coup while Mancham and most of his ministers were out of the country attending a Commonwealth conference in London. He established a one-party socialist state, but was pragmatic enough to keep the Americans on board: the dollar rent for the US tracking station paid for the country's annual oil imports. Despite the denial of political freedom within the one-party state, the social and economic transformation achieved by René's government was such that after he returned the country to multiparty rule in 1992–3, he and his party continued to win re-election through to his retirement in 2004.



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CHAPTER 29



The winning of independence (3)

Federation and independence in British Central Africa

British Central Africa faced the obstacle of a resident white settler population. Most of the white people lived in Southern Rhodesia (150,000 in 1950, rising to 200,000 by 1960). There, they dominated the African majority with South African-style segregationist legislation. A third of the territory – the best land – was reserved for white ownership, while most of the country's 4–5 million Africans were restricted to the poorest third of the country. Rigid 'pass laws' restricted the movement of workers in the towns and other racist laws reserved all the better paid jobs for whites. Since the 1920s, the white settlers of Southern Rhodesia had ruled the colony through their own system of elected parliamentary government. Africans only ever had very limited representation. African political parties were quickly suppressed as soon as they were formed.

Federation

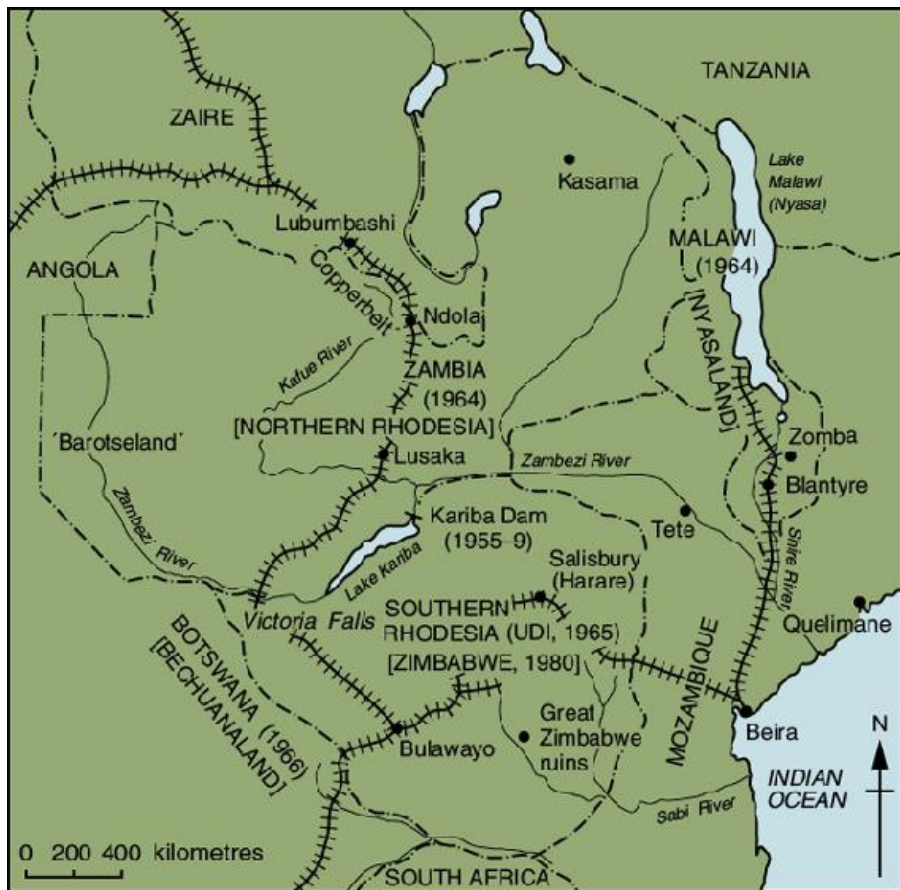
In the late 1940s, the white settlers of Northern and Southern

Rhodesia and Nyasaland proposed that the three territories be amalgamated into a central African federation. It was a deliberate attempt to pre-empt the emergence of an African independence movement. It would enable the whites of Southern Rhodesia to benefit from the enormous tax revenues arising out of the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, while Nyasaland would continue to provide their farms and new manufacturing industries with a ready supply of cheap labour. The enlarged state would then be economically powerful enough, like the whites in South Africa, to resist all moves towards African majority rule. This would encourage new British investment in the region, which in turn would further strengthen the white-dominated state.

The Africans of Southern Rhodesia did not stand to be so immediately affected by federation as those in the northern territories. They already suffered all the disadvantages of white racial domination. In the longer term, however, it affected them deeply in the sense that any strengthening of the white position would postpone still further the date of their eventual liberation. The Africans of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, on the other hand, stood to suffer an immediate loss by the proposed federation. They were still technically ruled as British 'protectorates' rather than settler colonies. The number of white settlers was much smaller than in the southern colony. Racial discrimination, although widely practised in the protectorates, especially in the South African-dominated mining towns of the Copperbelt, had not been enshrined in law.

African nationalists, particularly from the northern protectorates, protested vigorously against the proposed federation. Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and Harry Nkumbula summed up their fears in a written protest to the British government. Banda, born in Nyasaland, had qualified as a medical doctor in the USA and Britain. Although practising medicine in Britain, he kept in close touch with political developments in his home country. Nkumbula, a former teacher from Northern Rhodesia, was at the time (1949) studying at the University of London. They wrote:

Independence in British Central Africa



Of all the Europeans of Central Africa, those of Southern Rhodesia have the worst antipathy towards Africans ... They look upon the Africans as inferior beings, with no right to a dignified and refined existence and fit only as hewers of wood and drawers of water for Europeans ... In all their dealings with the Africans they always assume the attitude of conquerors ... It is these Europeans ... who will rule and govern the federation ... Under the Government provided by Southern Rhodesia, the relationship between us and the authorities will be one of slaves and masters, and the cardinal principle ... domination.¹

Despite vigorous African protest, federation was pushed through by the British government and white settlers in 1953. With it came all the effects of increased racial discrimination that African nationalists had feared. The immediate impact was an economic boom for whites, while Africans suffered the effects of frozen wage levels in the face of a rising cost of living. Strikes, such as the Copperbelt mineworkers' strike of 1956, were severely crushed by heavy police action. The

federal government approved a major new investment project: the building of the Kariba Dam across the Zambezi to provide hydroelectric power for Southern Rhodesia and the Copperbelt. The flooding of the valley behind the dam (begun in 1955, and completed in 1959) drove 30,000 Africans from the north bank of the river. Significantly, the power station was built on the south bank, putting it under full control of the Southern Rhodesian authorities.

The rise of African nationalism and demands for independence

The failure of the nationalist movements to prevent federation saw them discredited in African eyes, causing a temporary falling-off of African political activity. But new racist legislation, to strengthen still further white domination of government, revived the African political protest movement in 1956. It was now led by Nkumbula and the Northern Rhodesian African National Congress (founded 1948) and by the Nyasaland African Congress (founded 1944). They staged a series of boycotts, strikes and demonstrations in the northern territories. African political activity was severely suppressed in Southern Rhodesia. Partly inspired by the example of newly independent Ghana, African political leaders sought alternative African names for their own future independent states. Zambia (adapted from Zambezia) was proposed as the African name for Northern Rhodesia. Malawi, commemorating the seventeenth-century empire, was chosen for Nyasaland. African leaders in the southern colony chose the obvious name Zimbabwe to replace the hated name 'Rhodesia', which commemorated the white settlement's founder, Cecil Rhodes.

African political demands rapidly stepped up during 1957–9, especially after a number of political leaders had attended the All-African People's Conference at Accra in December 1958 (Figure 29.1). Governments reacted by trying to suppress protest, banning political parties and imprisoning their leaders. But as fast as parties were banned, others were founded to replace them. By this time, political protest had become so widespread that no amount of imprisoning of leaders would stop the movement. The new Zambia African National Congress was banned in 1959, to be replaced immediately by the United National Independence Party. Kenneth Kaunda, an outspoken critic of federation and the racism of colonial rule since the early 1950s, became its president on his release from prison in 1960. Following Dr Banda's return to Nyasaland in 1958, a campaign of demonstrations, strikes and riots led to the declaration of a state of emergency in 1959 (see Figure 29.2). The banned Nyasaland African Congress was quickly reformed as the Malawi Congress Party, with

Banda as its leader. Meanwhile, in Southern Rhodesia, the African National Congress had been revived in 1957 by the trade union leader Joshua Nkomo. After a series of bannings and imprisonments, it finally re-emerged as the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in 1962.

Independence for Zambia, Malawi and Rhodesian UDI

By 1960, the British government was finally forced to pay heed to the strength of African protest. Realising that the 'winds of change' were sweeping across Africa, the British saw it would be futile to continue supporting white minority rule in a Central African Federation.

The famous phrase 'wind of change' was coined by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on a visit to Ghana in January 1960. It was most famously repeated in a speech made to the white South African parliament in Cape Town a month later. Needless to say, while the speech played well in Ghana, his racist white audience in South Africa were more than a little annoyed by its tone and assumption of the inevitability of majority rule.

There followed three years of constitutional negotiation with the African politicians of the two northern protectorates before the break-up of federation at the end of 1963. Thereafter, Zambia and Malawi quickly moved to political independence in 1964.

In Southern Rhodesia, however, white settlers remained firmly in control, determined to resist all moves towards African majority rule. African politicians grew frustrated by Nkomo's failure to commit the party firmly to the obvious need for an armed guerrilla struggle. As a result, Ndabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe and others broke away from ZAPU in 1963 to form the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). But lack of clarity in planning, and regional rivalries between ZAPU and ZANU, tragically reduced their effectiveness during the crucial time of the break-up of the federation. In November 1965, Ian Smith, leader of the new white Rhodesia Front Party, made a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). He thereby illegally declared white-ruled 'Rhodesia' to be an independent state, free from any British colonial control. The British government protested but took little effective action to stop them. It was clear to the leaders of ZANU that a commitment to armed struggle was indeed the only way forward.

Figure 29.1 The opening session of the All-African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana, 8 December 1958.



Source: Phillip Harrington/Alamy Stock Photo.

The international community declared a policy of economic sanctions against the illegal Smith regime. But South Africa and Portuguese-ruled Mozambique ignored UN instructions and continued to trade with Rhodesia. Even British multinational oil companies secretly continued to supply the Smith regime. Ironically, the main

victim of sanctions was Zambia, most of whose trade had hitherto passed through Rhodesia.

Figure 29.2 Front page of *The Nyasaland Times* at the time of the state of emergency, 13 March 1959.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's liberation war, 1966–80

The first clash between ZANU guerrillas and Rhodesian security forces took place at Chinhoyi, north of the capital Salisbury in April 1966. The guerrillas were easily outgunned and seven were killed, but, coming so soon after the Rhodesian UDI, it was a warning to the Smith regime of the struggle that was to come. There followed a number of incidents in the late 1960s, but ZANU and ZAPU were still torn by personal and ideological disputes in their exile in Zambia.

In 1971–2, FRELIMO, the Mozambican liberation movement, occupied much of the Tete district of Mozambique (see [Map 29.2](#)) and, thereafter, ZANU guerrillas were able to infiltrate the northeastern districts of Rhodesia in large numbers. The war now began to enter a new, decisive phase as the guerrillas successfully promoted their cause in the rural areas before launching attacks against settler farms, police posts and security forces. The latter found it increasingly difficult to get local people to inform on the guerrillas. FRELIMO's victory in Mozambique in 1974–5 (see later in this chapter) enabled ZANU guerrillas to enter Rhodesia all along the country's eastern border zone. Robert Mugabe took over the leadership of ZANU in 1975 and set about strengthening the party, committing the movement to the achievement of a socialist revolution in a liberated Zimbabwe. The war entered its final decisive phase in 1977. By then, ZANU political cadres had been preparing the ground for independence by winning the support of the rural people for up to five or six years. ZAPU, by contrast, although heavily supplied with Soviet-made weapons in their training camps in Zambia, made few effective incursions into the western half of the country until this final phase of the war.

Independence in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe

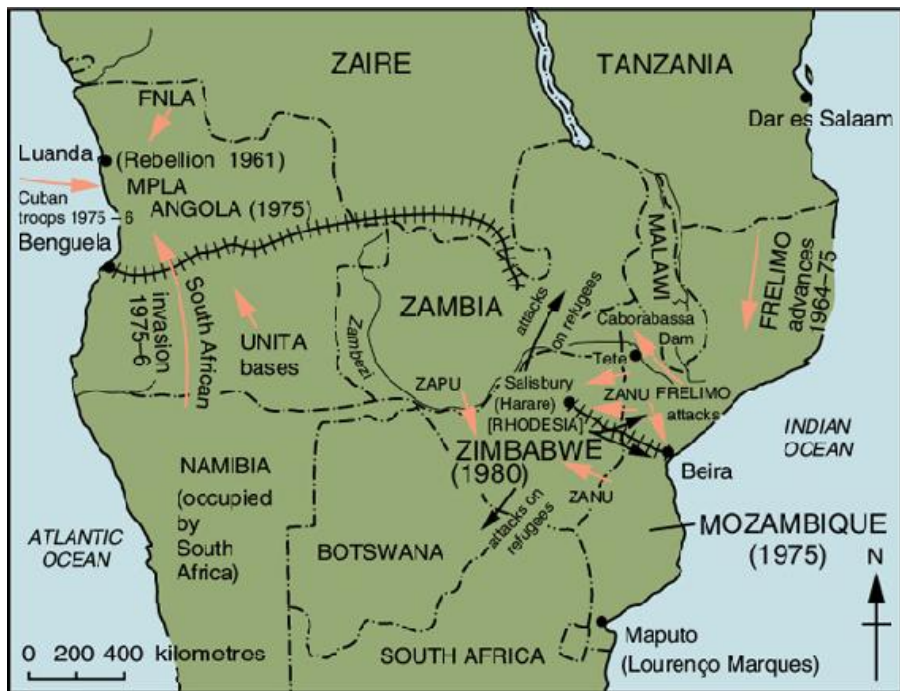
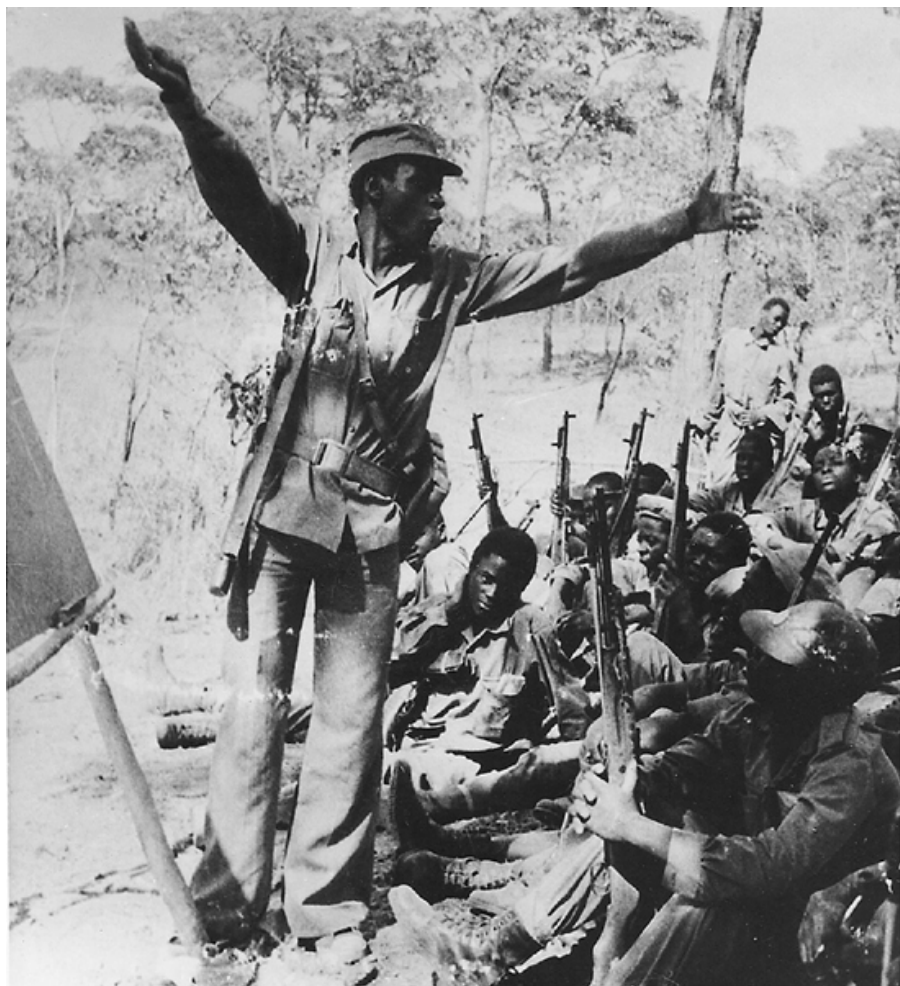


Figure 29.3 Political education in a Zimbabwe Independence People's Revolutionary Army – military wing of ZAPU – training camp in Zambia in the 1970s.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

The Smith regime reacted to the gathering onslaught by attacking ZANU and ZAPU bases and refugee camps in Zambia and Mozambique. Among other tactics, the Rhodesians financed and armed a group of dissatisfied Mozambicans, whom they called the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or RENAMO). These were used by the Rhodesian security forces to penetrate deep into Mozambique, blowing up bridges, cutting power lines and attacking villages. The idea was to cripple newly independent Mozambique's economy and so 'persuade' FRELIMO to abandon its support for ZANU. In the event, Rhodesia's RENAMO tactics failed, as FRELIMO support for ZANU never faltered, and ZANU went on to win power in Zimbabwe. Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, South Africa took over sponsorship of RENAMO in an attempt to assert its own political and economic domination of the region.

In its dying months (1978–9), the Smith regime, under pressure from South Africa, tried to bypass the guerrillas and reach an internal settlement. There were a number of influential Africans in Zimbabwe, churchmen and chiefs, who wished to end the suffering of the war but feared the outright victory of a socialist-oriented ZANU. They were therefore prepared to compromise their complete independence. Under an agreement signed in 1978, Bishop Abel Muzorewa became prime minister of what was called ‘Zimbabwe-Rhodesia’. The name itself indicated the reality of compromise. Whites retained a strong political voice and still remained in control of the economy. Unsurprisingly, the guerrilla fighters, who by now had the upper hand, were not prepared to accept this kind of compromise and the war went on. Muzorewa, unable to stop the war, found his government fighting his fellow Zimbabweans and he was soon discredited.

By late 1979, the guerrillas of both ZANU and ZAPU controlled the majority of the country outside the main cities. The Smith/Muzorewa regime was forced to acknowledge defeat. Under an agreement signed in London in December 1979, both sides agreed to stop fighting while full and free elections were held in February 1980. These resulted in a resounding victory for ZANU, and Robert Mugabe became prime minister of an independent Zimbabwe in April 1980.

The winning of independence in Portuguese-ruled Africa

Portugal, ruled by a fascist dictatorship, was a poor state in European terms. Her African colonies, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, Angola and Mozambique, were seen as vital props to the Portuguese economy. The Portuguese government was, therefore, determined not to give way to demands for independence. The Africans of the Portuguese colonies were equally determined to win their independence. Violent Portuguese suppression of African protest in all three territories in the late 1950s and early 1960s made it clear that African liberation would only be won through prolonged guerrilla struggle. The lead was taken by Portugal’s smallest colony. This comprised the small mainland territory of Portuguese Guinea (now known as Guinea-Bissau), just south of Senegal, and a group of Portuguese-held islands some 600 kilometres off the coast of Senegal known as Cape Verde.

Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde

In 1956, Amílcar Cabral, a Cape Verdean, founded the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde). He began building up membership and devising a strategy for gaining independence. In 1959, the PAIGC prompted a major strike by dockers in the mainland port of Bissau. The strike was brutally crushed by colonial police, leaving 50 workers shot dead. This was the turning point. Cabral dedicated the PAIGC to a full-scale liberation war in order to create a socialist state. (For the role of socialism in independent Africa, see [Chapter 30](#).) The war began in 1963 and over the next decade the rural people of Guinea-Bissau were gradually won over to support the cause. As rural areas were liberated, schools, health clinics, roads, agricultural projects and trade were built and maintained – all the trappings of a government of grassroots socialism, based on the needs of the people. By September 1973, so much of mainland Guinea had been liberated that the PAIGC was able to declare an independent state. This was beginning to receive worldwide recognition when Cabral was assassinated by Portuguese agents in January 1974. Tragically, he did not live to see the final withdrawal of Portuguese troops in September 1974.

During his term of duty in Guinea-Bissau (1968–73), the Portuguese commander General Spínola became convinced that the war could not be won. He realised that the continuing war in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique was draining the Portuguese economy dry. It was largely these African liberation wars that prompted Spínola and a group of army officers to topple their country's dictatorship in a military coup d'état in Portugal in April 1974. It can be argued, therefore, that Africa's liberation movements helped liberate Portugal from dictatorship. In turn, the coup in Lisbon led directly to Portuguese military withdrawal from Africa and the independence of Angola and Mozambique in 1975.

Angola

The principal liberation movement in Angola was the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) founded by Agostino Neto among the urban working class of Luanda in December 1956. In early 1961, with most of the MPLA leaders in gaol awaiting trial, a revolt erupted among peasants objecting to compulsory cotton cultivation and forced labour practices. The uprising quickly spread to the urban poor of Luanda who tried storming the prison to release their leaders. The Portuguese police and armed forces reacted with predictable brutality, indiscriminately killing hundreds of Africans around Luanda. The uprising spread to northern Angola under the

direction of Holden Roberto's Bakongo-based FNLA (Frente Nacional Libertação de Angola).

It was the beginning of a lengthy and bitterly fought liberation war that only ended with Angolan independence in 1975. But the struggle was complicated by the interference of foreign powers. Most of the guerrilla fighting was borne by the MPLA, which, with its socialist programme for populist reform, managed to attract training and weapons from the Soviet Union. The FNLA, based in Zaire (Congo), took little effective part in the struggle until the war was nearly won. Then, with Zairean and US backing, it concentrated its forces against the Soviet-supported MPLA not the Portuguese. Another late entry to the war was Jonas Savimbi's UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola), based among the Ovimbundu of southeastern Angola. Like the FNLA, UNITA was more concerned with fighting the MPLA than with fighting the Portuguese. In 1974, UNITA even formed an anti-MPLA alliance with the Portuguese. UNITA was heavily backed and supplied with weaponry by South Africa who sought to install it as an alternative government to the MPLA. The South Africans feared that an MPLA government in Angola would provide support for the SWAPO liberation movement that they themselves were fighting in Namibia (see below).

As the Portuguese withdrew during 1975, Angola found itself in a state of civil war. The MPLA had secured the capital Luanda, and had the widest level of support in the rural areas. In the crucial early months of 1975, the MPLA received a small assignment of weaponry from the tiny, newly independent state of Guinea-Bissau. It was more a sign of socialist solidarity from the PAIGC than a significant contribution to the struggle. Angolan independence was scheduled for November when Neto's MPLA expected to assume control. In an attempt to prevent this happening, the South African army invaded Angola from Namibia and pushed northwards towards Luanda. At the same time, the USA equipped the FNLA for an invasion from the north. This was supported by the Zairean army, Portuguese irregulars and assorted white mercenaries. Neto went ahead and declared independence on behalf of the MPLA and hastily summoned the aid of 13,000 Soviet-equipped Cuban troops. These, together with MPLA forces (now the national army of Angola), managed to expel the South Africans and the FNLA and its allies by the early weeks of 1976. UNITA, meanwhile, was pushed back to its bases in the hilly southeastern country of Moxico Province.

Angola was now officially united and independent under an MPLA government. But, through the 1980s, Savimbi's UNITA continued to prove a thorn in its flesh as the South Africans and Americans

continued to support their protégé with money and weapons and periodic South African invasions.

Figure 29.4 Portuguese soldiers talk to an Angolan man during a patrol on 10 September 1974 near Santa Eulalia. After independence, Angola was the scene of an intense civil war from 1975 to 2002, with the MPLA government opposing the FNLA and UNITA.



Source: STF/AFP/Getty Images.

Mozambique

Exiled Mozambicans in the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam managed to unify their liberation movements with the formation of FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) in 1962. They too had suffered the rude shock of Portuguese methods with the shooting of several hundred protesting peasants in northern Mozambique in June 1960. Eduardo Mondlane and his deputy Samora Machel led FRELIMO's struggle in Mozambique with an official declaration of war in September 1964.

As the war progressed, Mondlane and FRELIMO grew increasingly convinced of the need for a socialist transformation of the country. Mondlane wrote: 'We are not replacing a foreign ruling class with a Mozambican one. Our movement must be a revolution.' The mass of the peasantry were to be the base of that revolution. Like PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, FRELIMO set up alternative local government in the liberated zones of Mozambique. But tragically, also like PAIGC,

FRELIMO lost its inspirational leader, Mondlane, to an assassin's bomb in February 1969. It was left to Samora Machel to take up the leadership of the liberation movement and lead FRELIMO to victory and Mozambique to independence in 1975.

The struggle for freedom in southern Africa

South Africa in the postwar era

As we have seen so far in this chapter and [Chapter 28](#), wherever there have been colonies of substantial white settlement in Africa, those colonists have done all in their power to resist moves towards African majority rule. Unsurprisingly, in South Africa, the country with the largest population of white settlers, resistance to African majority rule was firmest. By the 1970s, South Africa had a population of 4 million white people who ruled over and dominated a population of up to 20 million black people. (The country also contained 2 million people of mixed race and Asian origin who, in terms of the South African racial hierarchy, came between the whites and the black African majority.) However, South Africa was not, strictly speaking, a colony in the same sense as the other colonies of Africa. Since 1910, the Union of South Africa had internal self-government, although the nominal head of state was still (until 1961) the British monarch. But it was self-government by and for the white minority. Even the small number of black people who had met the strict requirements for the right to vote were deprived of that right in 1936. In no sense would any European decolonisation bring African independence to South Africa. African majority rule in South Africa would have to be achieved through the internal efforts of South Africans themselves. It was this which South Africa's white population were determined to resist.

The white people of South Africa were helped by the fact that their country was economically the most powerful in the continent. That strength originated from the mineral revolution of the 1870s and 80s (see [Chapter 23](#)). During the Second World War, South Africa's industrial base was broadened by the rapid development of manufacturing industry. Deprived of wartime imports from Europe, South Africa manufactured her own consumer goods. South African industry was helped by British wartime needs for ship repairs and supplies from South African ports. South African industrial growth during 1940–5 provided important new job opportunities for black people. Driven off their land in the rural areas, they poured into the towns in search of wage employment.

South Africa's entry into the war was strongly opposed by a group

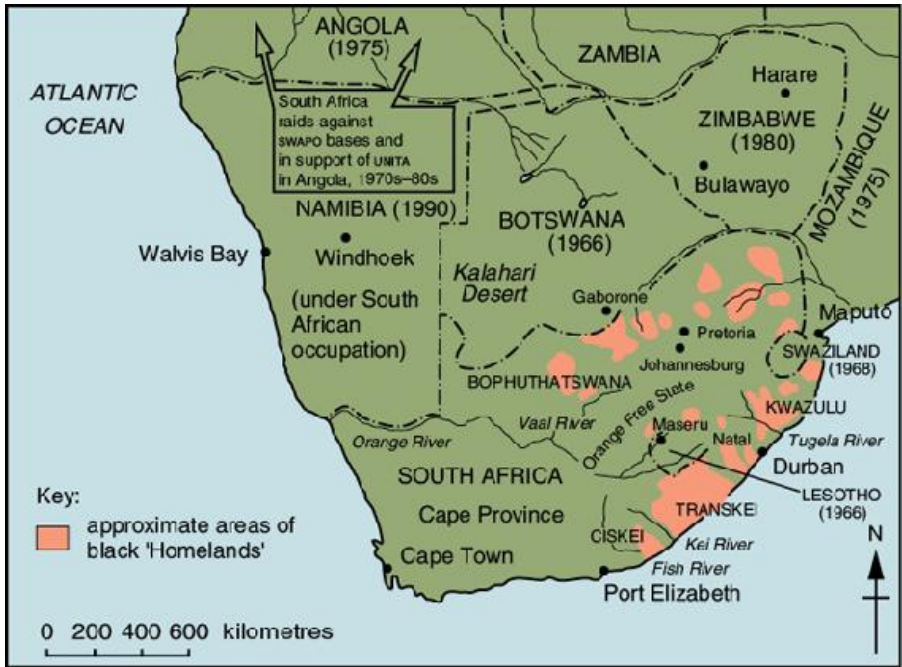
of military Afrikaner nationalists calling themselves the *Ossewa Brandwag*. They were sympathetic to Nazi Germany and a number of them were interred during the war. After the war, members of the *Ossewa Brandwag* were absorbed into the mainstream Afrikaner National Party. In the years after the war, the National Party played on white fears that black people, left ‘uncontrolled’, would soon come to dominate the urban areas and the growing industrial economy. Then, the movement for African freedom, which was gathering pace across the continent, would be impossible to stop, even in South Africa. Playing on white fears with blatant racist propaganda, the National Party won a parliamentary majority in the whites-only general election of 1948.

The development of the apartheid state

The National Party government reinforced the segregationist system that had developed over the previous 50 years, which had, in turn, been built in the years of colonial conquest of the nineteenth century. It introduced a series of laws to establish a more clear-cut racist system designed to guarantee permanent white domination in South Africa. It was called ‘apartheid’, meaning ‘separateness’. The ultimate aim of apartheid, as developed during the 1950s, was to make black people ‘foreigners’ in the 86 per cent of their own country that had been officially designated ‘white’. Black people were to be restricted to the poverty-stricken and overcrowded ‘reserves’ (later designated ‘homelands’) unless they were in the direct employ of white people.

The Population Registration Act 1950 classified people according to race, dividing them basically into white and ‘non-white’. Under the old imperial principle of ‘divide and rule’, ‘non-whites’ were subdivided into ‘coloured’ (mixed race), Indians (descendants of contract labourers brought to the sugar plantations of Natal in the nineteenth century) and ‘Bantu’ (the majority black population). The latter were, in turn, even further subdivided into various ethnic groups: Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Venda, Sotho and so on. It was a deliberate attempt to weaken African unity and destroy any countrywide sense of African nationalism. The Group Areas Act 1950 determined the places where the various races could live. These two Acts formed the cornerstone of the apartheid system. A wide range of further apartheid laws affected every aspect of South African social life, banning sexual relations between the races and segregating public places, buses and schools. Primarily, however, it was an economic system, designed to restrict black people to the position of a permanently subordinate, low-paid working class.

Southern Africa: independence and resistance



All African trade union activity was banned, enabling white employers to offer Africans very low wage levels with impunity. In contrast, white workers, whether skilled or unskilled, received wages that were ten or more times those of black workers. One of the most hated features of the apartheid system was the Bantu Education Act 1953. This withdrew black education from control of the missionaries. It forced black students into government schools to study syllabuses that were designed to emphasise ethnic differences and to teach them only the bare skills needed to work for white employers.

African protest and resistance to apartheid

The introduction of new, harshly racist legislation provided new stimulus to African protest and resistance in South Africa. There was a wave of resistance to the new pass laws, agricultural restrictions and Bantu authorities in the rural areas, as well as a number of spontaneous strikes, boycotts and demonstrations in the towns. The African National Congress (ANC; see [Chapter 25](#)) was boosted by the leadership of a new generation of young, educated Africans, among them Johannesburg lawyers Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo and

trade unionist Walter Sisulu.

During 1952, the ANC staged a Defiance Campaign, deliberately defying apartheid's segregationist laws and refusing to carry passes. By January 1953, thousands of ANC members had been arrested and the campaign fizzled out. In 1955, at a large public meeting south of Johannesburg, the ANC joined with Indian, 'coloured' and radical white political groups in forming the Congress Alliance and adopting the Freedom Charter, a blueprint for creating a new, non-racist and partially socialist South Africa. The government, meanwhile, used harsh new laws to suppress all opposition, declaring it to be 'communist' and directed by the Soviet Union. In 1956, 156 Congress Alliance members were put on trial for treason, but the prosecution failed to prove that the Freedom Charter was a treasonable document and all the accused were finally acquitted in 1961. By then a split had occurred in the ranks of the ANC. There were those who felt that African freedom would only be achieved by a purely African movement. They resented the influence they felt that white liberals and black and white members of the South African Communist Party exercised on the leadership of the ANC, and in particular on the Freedom Charter. In 1958–9, these Africanists broke away from the ANC to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe.

A considerable number of Jews had emigrated from eastern Europe to South Africa during the 1930s and 40s, and many of these, although white, were strongly opposed to the apartheid government. Unable to join the ANC, a number of them joined the South African Communist Party, which was strongest in its demand for a universal, non-racial franchise. They, and many others not in the Communist Party, played a prominent part in the struggle against apartheid.

The Year of Africa, 1960, dawned in South Africa with none of the signs of impending liberation being experienced by Africans over so much of the rest of the continent. The ANC and PAC executives were determined to push things forward with a year of massive peaceful protest in South Africa. But they had not reckoned on the response of the police. At Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, on 21 March 1960, police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, killing 69 and wounding 180, most of them shot in the back as they fled ([Figure 29.5](#)).

Figure 29.5 The Sharpeville massacre, 21 March 1960, marked a turning point in the political history of southern Africa. While it temporarily halted the peaceful march of political freedom in South Africa, it hastened the decolonisation of South Africa's neighbours, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.



Source: Bettmann/Getty Images.

The Sharpeville massacre marked a new phase in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. Fearing revolution, the government swiftly banned the ANC and the PAC, and thousands of their members were arrested. The South African government received worldwide condemnation. At the UN, newly independent African and Asian states called for economic sanctions to be imposed on South Africa, although this was vetoed by South Africa's main trading partners, Britain and the USA. The prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace (1961) was awarded to Albert Luthuli, president of the now-banned ANC. But the South African government defied international condemnation, withdrew from the Commonwealth and declared itself a republic.

Pushed underground, the ANC executive reluctantly admitted the need for armed resistance. It formed an armed wing of the party, Umkhonto we Sizwe ('Spear of the Nation'), and sent Oliver Tambo abroad to organise political, financial and weaponry support from a position of exile. In 1963, after several successful sabotage attacks, the high command of Umkhonto was captured on a farm in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. They were put on trial for treason, for which the penalty was death or imprisonment for life. At the conclusion of the trial, on 20 April 1964 Nelson Mandela read a statement to the court, tracing the ANC's long but fruitless history of non-violent protest. Mandela concluded with the now famous words:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have

fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.²

Mandela, Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni were all sentenced to life imprisonment. Goldberg, the only white man sentenced, was returned to Pretoria Central Prison, while the others were flown to Robben Island.

The struggle continues

Confident that it had averted black revolution by brutally suppressing all opposition in the early 1960s, the South African government pressed ahead with its apartheid policies.

Resistance re-emerged in the early 1970s in the form of widespread spontaneous strikes for higher pay by black workers, especially in Natal. The success of early strike action led to further strikes until the government was forced to legalise limited black trade unionism. Simultaneously, there developed among black students a new Africanist movement known as 'Black Consciousness'. Like the Négritude movement in French colonial West Africa ([Chapter 25](#)), the aim of Black Consciousness was to restore black self-respect. It reawoke black determination to achieve their own liberation without the help of white liberals and others.

Black school students had long chafed against the inferior quality of black education, which received barely one-tenth of the level of funding spent on education of the white minority. On 16 June 1976, police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration by 15,000 school children in the Johannesburg suburb of Soweto. It was the spark that set off a fire of revolt right across the country. Rioting, school boycotts and police oppression followed for much of 1976–7, leaving at least 600 dead and countless thousands wounded, imprisoned, or fled into exile. Among those beaten to death in police custody was the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko. Most of those who had fled the country joined the ANC in exile in Tanzania and Zambia.

In the early 1980s, black protesters in the townships of the eastern Cape and the Transvaal effectively boycotted white-owned shops and businesses, schools and municipal housing rents. The government responded by revising the constitution to allow 'coloured' and Asian

people a separate and subordinate parliament. By way of reform for black people, they set up black-run township councils in the belief that they would be more effective in controlling the townships and collecting rents. But these councils were quickly discredited as government stooges, and as such became targets for the people's anger. Radically minded, unemployed and out of school youths – self-styled 'comrades' – set up alternative 'civic associations' in the townships. They established their own people's courts to try known petty criminals as well as enforce the boycotts and condemn police spies.

And they found a passionate and inspiring champion in Winnie Madikizela Mandela (1936–2018), wife of the imprisoned ANC leader Nelson Mandela (1918–2013). His imprisonment from 1962 had been intended to remove his name and memory from public consciousness. But the state had reckoned without his wife Winnie who kept his memory alive through the nearly three decades of his imprisonment. The South African security forces did their best to silence her. But Winnie Madikizela's spirited defiance in the face of banning, beatings, exile and torture not only kept the name of Mandela alive, she was, in her own right, *the* leading figure of resistance in the face of state violence through the mid- to late 1980s. Her instigation and personal involvement in violent 'summary justice' in the townships is easy to condemn in retrospect. But this was war, and without that resistance, which she led in the 1980s, the collapse of apartheid would not have happened as and when it did. Winnie Madikizela Mandela's popular moniker 'Mother of the Nation' was hard-earned through three decades of courage and defiance. Indeed, it could be argued that it was *her* struggle through these difficult years that enabled *him* to walk free as the heroic and iconic figure that he became, instead of the half-forgotten relic of a previous era that the apartheid state had hoped to reduce him into.

By July 1985, the townships had become ungovernable and President P.W. Botha declared a state of emergency in selected townships around the country. Hundreds died and thousands were detained in the security clampdown that followed. At the same time, the security forces encouraged conservative black people – mostly migrant worker hostel dwellers, who were fearful of the revolutionary youth – to act as vigilantes to break the township boycotts and the power of the radical comrades. From September 1985, bands of vigilantes attacked and burned the homes and squatter camps that housed known sympathisers of the boycotts while the security forces looked on.

Meanwhile, the international news media relayed television

coverage of the conflict in the townships, in particular the ruthless way the security forces fired live ammunition into crowds of unarmed demonstrators. It was clear that the South African government's much vaunted 'reforms' were meaningless to the black majority and the level of state violence was unacceptable to world opinion. Western governments, which had hitherto paid little serious heed to the iniquities of apartheid, could no longer justify their old position. Foreign capital began to flee the country and, between August and November 1985, South Africa's currency, the rand, fell to a third of its 1984 value.

At about the same time, a number of prominent white businessmen travelled north to the Zambian capital, Lusaka, to meet the ANC in exile. This was followed in 1986 by further visits from South African politicians and academics, mostly Afrikaners. Clearly, the government of the Afrikaner National Party was rapidly losing credibility, even among its own supporters. But it still would not recognise the fact and responded by extending the state of emergency to the whole country in 1986, combined with widespread banning and detentions through 1987. For the South African state, however, it was Namibia that proved to be the final straw that broke the camel's proverbial back.

Namibian independence

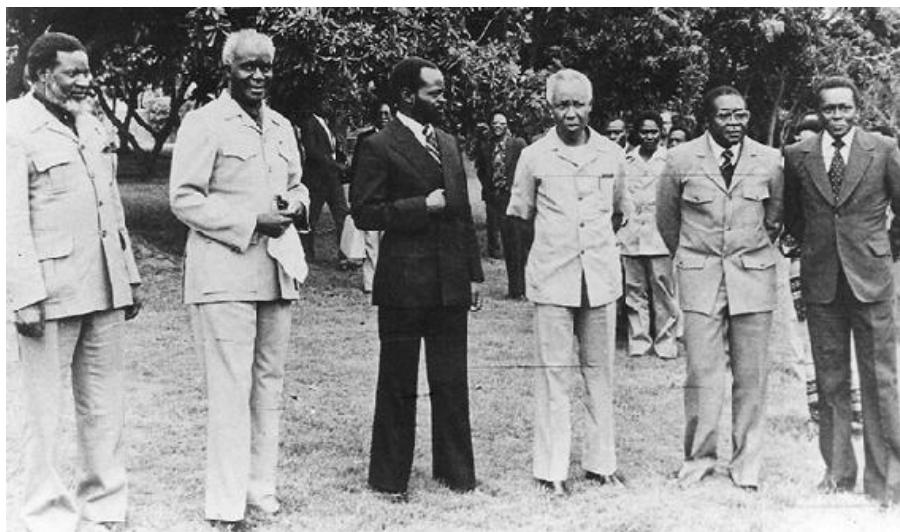
Namibia had been occupied and ruled by South Africa ever since the South African army had conquered the German colonists there in 1915 during the First World War. From 1919, the country became a League of Nations' trust territory, with the mandate to rule being officially granted to Britain, who transferred the role to its dominion, South Africa. When, following the Second World War, the trust was handed to the league's successor, the UN, the South African government refused to honour the terms of the trust and prepare the country for independence. It treated the largely desert territory of Namibia as a fifth province of South Africa ('South West Africa') and, with the country still heavily settled by white people, applied to the indigenous Namibians all the oppressive legislation of apartheid.

In 1960, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) began its long campaign of guerrilla activity against the occupying forces of South Africa. We saw above the lengths to which South Africa was prepared to go to cut off support for SWAPO in the emerging independent republic of Angola. Meanwhile, as South African occupation of Namibia continued in defiance of UN resolutions, South African-based mining companies stepped up their exploitation of the country's vast natural mineral resources, including

diamonds, copper, uranium and many other valuable minerals. Clearly, a future independent Namibia would inherit greatly depleted mineral reserves.

By the late 1980s, the situation was reaching a crisis. For years the South Africans had fought SWAPO, the Angolan MPLA government and their Cuban allies in the southern Angolan bush. A major South African invasion of southern Angola in 1987 was related to the government's need to convince its white electorate that it was taking the security war to the real enemy, the foreign black 'communist hordes' of its propaganda imagination. By this time, however, the Cuban-trained Angolan airforce had gained command of the skies above southern Angola and, by mid-1988, the South African invasion force was cut off and trapped at Cuito Cuanavale. The South African government was finally forced to the negotiating table. With American mediation, it agreed to end its long-term illegal occupation of Namibia in exchange for the safe evacuation of its stranded troops from Cuito Cuanavale and the phased withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Once accepted, this led fairly quickly to free elections in Namibia, won by SWAPO in 1989, and Namibian independence under President Sam Nujoma on 21 March 1990 – the thirtieth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre.

Figure 29.6 Frontline States' leaders at a conference on Namibia held in Lusaka, 1980. Left to right: Sam Nujoma, leader of SWAPO, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, President Samora Machel of Mozambique, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and President Jose Eduardo dos Santos of Angola. The other key Frontline president, Seretse Khama of Botswana, was too ill to attend the conference: he died a month later. The Frontline States was an informal group of the leaders of the countries bordering South Africa and formerly Rhodesia, which supported the liberation struggle. Tanzania, a leader in the struggle, was also a member.



Source: National Archives of Zimbabwe.

South Africa's liberation elections

In 1989, President P.W. Botha suffered a stroke and was forced to retire. F.W. de Klerk took over as president and leader of the National Party. Although formerly a hardliner in the Cabinet, de Klerk was forced by the realities of power into a reassessment of the whole situation. He took the bold step of repealing the Population Registration and Group Areas Acts, lifting the state of emergency, unbanning the ANC, the PAC and other political parties, and releasing a number of prominent political prisoners. On 11 February 1990, the most important political prisoner of them all, Nelson Mandela, was finally set free after 27 years in prison ([Figure 29.7](#)).

Figure 29.7 After 27 years in prison, most of it spent on the notorious Robben Island, Nelson Mandela walks free on 11 February 1990, holding the hand of his wife, Winnie Madikizela Mandela – the ‘Mother of the Nation’. It was a symbolic moment that marked the beginning of the end of apartheid, although four years of tough negotiation lay ahead before the ‘freedom election’ of April 1994 and the inauguration of Mandela as the first president of a free South Africa.



Source: Allan Tannenbaum/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images.

There followed four long years of intensive and dramatic negotiations between the various political parties, principally Mandela's ANC and de Klerk's National Party government, as they thrashed out the guiding principles for a future constitution. Negotiations played out against a background of rising violence in the country. Thousands lost their lives as rival political forces sought to fill the power vacuum being created by the weakness of transitional government. Old hostilities between hostel dwellers and township residents in the Transvaal and the Cape were stoked by elements in the security forces who still regarded the ANC as the old communist enemy. Similarly, in Natal, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Kwa-Zulu chief minister, with support from right-wing elements in the security forces, used his Inkatha Freedom Party as a vigilante force to curtail the influence and support of the ANC among the Zulus of Natal. Meanwhile, right-wing Afrikaners rumbled in the wings with threats of armed revolt and vague calls for an independent Afrikaner homeland.

In spite of the persistent violence, an agreement was eventually reached. South Africa's first non-racial election was held over four days in April 1994 ([Figure 29.8](#)). The ANC won 63 per cent of the vote and, on 10 May 1994, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as president to head an ANC-dominated 'government of national unity', with two

vice-presidents: Thabo Mbeki and F.W. de Klerk.

Figure 29.8 In one of the crowning events of twentieth-century Africa, South Africans of all races queued for many hours at polling stations across the country for the right to cast their vote in the country's first non-racial national election, spread over four days, 26–29 April 1994.



Source: Raymond Preston/Sunday Times/Gallo Images/Getty Images.

Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland

When the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, it was assumed by British and South African governments that the British protectorates of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland would, in due course, be joined to the union. Bechuanaland and Basutoland were regarded as little more than labour reserves for the expanding industrial development of South Africa, while more than half the land in Swaziland was owned by white South Africans. In all three countries, colonial officials relied on traditional chiefly authorities to run much of the local administration, including the collection of taxation.

The emerging political crisis of the 1950s in South Africa undoubtedly had an influence on local demands for more democratic

accountability in the 'high commission territories'. This could be interpreted as a criticism of the abuse of chiefly power as much as a criticism of colonial overrule. Despite the hardening of apartheid, however, British colonial authorities still saw the political future of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland as falling within some sort of union with South Africa. It was not until the Sharpeville crisis of March 1960 that all notion of future amalgamation with South Africa was finally abandoned. Britain then allowed the development of African political parties and began the process of constitutional reform that would lead to independence.

The people of Bechuanaland were used to the concept of accountable government through their traditional *kgotla* system, whereby a chief was accountable to his people, so they found no problem with the form of representative parliamentary government put forward by the British. The transition to independence was eased by the fact that the largest political party was led by Seretse Khama, the uncrowned king of the largest Batswana group. He became president of the Republic of Botswana in 1966.

In Basutoland, the multiplicity of chiefs were eager not to lose power through the emergence of political parties and they formed their own party to appeal to traditionalist values. There was plenty of tension between chiefs and commoners (mostly trade unionists radicalised by experience in South Africa) in the run-up to independence. After a closely fought election, the party of Chief Leabua Jonathan emerged the victor, and he became prime minister. At independence in 1966, the paramount chief became King Moshoeshoe II of the independent Kingdom of Lesotho. (The British had ruled Basutoland indirectly through the local chiefs, having downgraded the precolonial king to the position of chief, as there could only be one monarch, the British one, although recognising that he was above the other chiefs, hence the title 'paramount chief'.)

In Swaziland, King Sobhuza II had remained a dominant force, with British support, throughout the colonial period. With the approach of independence in the early 1960s, Sobhuza formed his own political party to pre-empt the emergence of any credible alternative political force. Through the traditional patronage of district chiefs, Sobhuza's party swept the board at the independence elections and he himself, in effect, became executive head of state of the independent Kingdom of Swaziland in 1968.



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AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE



The liberation of the African continent from the colonial grip was not only a political liberation, but a cultural and psychological one as well. Africans were back in charge of their own destinies – or at least it was assumed that that was what ‘independence’ meant. It soon became clear, however, that despite people’s great expectations of a better life, there were severe limits on how much their new leaders could achieve in terms of social and economic development. The colonial inheritance soon proved to be a heavy burden on the new,

independent nations of Africa. For a start, their new, artificial ‘national’ identities conflicted with their precolonial and cultural senses of identity and belonging. This was to provide a contradiction that was never really resolved, and was to emerge and re-emerge as inter-ethnic distrust and potential conflict at any time of political or economic crisis, even into the sixth decade of independence. And, as the façade of democratic process broke down in the 1960s and 70s, the real colonial legacy of political autocracy and economic dependency re-emerged. With the terms of trade rigged against her, Africa has not been playing the international trading system on a level playing field.

If Africa has a poor overall reputation internationally, it is surely undeserved, for it is a reputation projected mostly by those who are ill-informed of the reality. There have indeed been many failures – personal and structural – but these are outweighed by the great achievements in terms of social and economic development and, in the twenty-first century, increasing political stability. As [Chapters 30–32](#) survey the challenges and dilemmas of development and the democratic advances of recent decades alongside conflict resolution, it is the African initiative that stands out. When, under huge structural and personal strain, order breaks down, Africans have learned from bitter experience the folly of the Organisation of African Unity’s early principle of non-interference in the affairs of other member states. With African troops involved in peacekeeping missions¹ and west African leaders prepared to use force if necessary to uphold democratic practices in neighbouring states, the continent is gradually finding the way forward to political stability and with it, a greater degree of economic prosperity for more than just a corrupt élite.

CHAPTER 30

African responses to the colonial legacy

The problems that Africans and their governments had to face in the early decades after independence were, very largely, the product of their history. This is not to suggest that the mistakes, corruption or incompetence of some African leaders, or even ecological factors beyond any leader's control, were not partly to blame for Africa's continuing underdevelopment. But the roots of many of Africa's intractable problems in the early decades of independence were to be found in the period of colonial rule. In spite of this, however, Africans' determination to better themselves led to major social and education advances, especially in the first decade of independence.

The political legacy

Autocracy

It was only on the eve of independence that the French and the British had introduced to Africa their own systems of parliamentary democracy, with all their attendant, inappropriate European ceremony and formality. By then, Europeans preferred to forget that colonial rule had been largely established in Africa by military conquest, or the threat of it, and sustained by autocratic rule. The real political legacy of colonial government in Africa was that of an alien dictatorship, benevolent at times, but always prepared to crush outspoken opposition. Many of Africa's independence leaders had suffered periods of detention without trial for daring to speak out against the unjust and arbitrary nature of colonial authority.

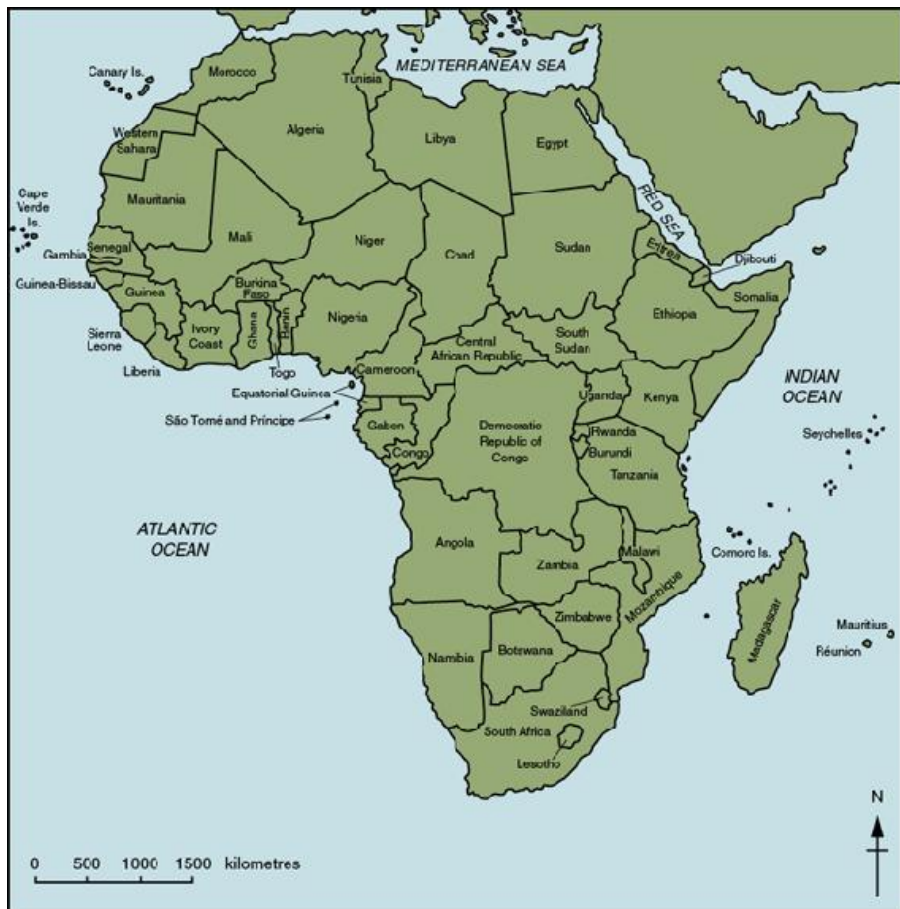
The artificial state

The boundaries of the countries themselves were mostly totally artificial (see Map 30.1). They had been created at the whim of European politicians with little or no regard for Africa's multitude of precolonial nation-states and small-scale village communities. Peoples of widely differing languages and political and cultural traditions had been cobbled together for European convenience. The widespread colonial use of 'indirect rule' (see [Chapter 25](#)) further served to emphasise the differences. These people were now suddenly expected to feel at ease with systems of multiparty parliamentary democracy, such as had only evolved in the nation-states of Europe after centuries of conflict.

The artificiality of Africa's national boundaries caused serious

problems in establishing ‘national’ unity after independence. African politicians may have been united by their anti-colonial sentiments, but they were yet to think of themselves as part of a single nation. Zambia’s often-repeated political slogan, ‘One Zambia: One Nation’, was not so much the expression of a sense of national pride as a desire by the ruling party to create a sense of nationhood among the multitude of Zambia’s differing language groups. And citizens of, for instance, the colonially created state of Nigeria were, in their own minds, primarily Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa or whatever, rather than ‘Nigerians’. Countries with a single dominant party headed by an inspiring national leader, such as Senegal under Senghor or Tanzania under Nyerere, were not so plagued by problems of national unity. But, for most African countries that inherited multiparty systems at independence, political parties were based more on the personal ethnic or regional origins of particular politicians than on differing economic ideologies to guide the country’s future development.

The dual legacy of authoritarian rule and artificial nation-states was to bedevil political stability on the continent in the early years of African independence, and it is an issue with which African leaders are still struggling in the twenty-first century. We have seen in [Chapter 29](#) the chaos that it brought to the Congo in the early 1960s. Most newly independent African states were plagued to a greater or lesser extent by some form of ‘regionalism’. In Nigeria, it culminated in an attempt by the Igbo of the southeast to secede as the ‘Republic of Biafra’ in 1967, sparking a harrowing two-and-a-half years of bitter civil war before national reunification could be achieved. Nigeria’s solution has been to create a federal constitution with a multiplicity of regional states, but mistrust and conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim, added to the ethnic mix has, if anything, intensified. Even in the twenty-first century, disunity remains a festering sore within the Nigerian state. This, combined with political, economic and security neglect of the northeast, has allowed the theocratic bandit group Boko Haram to spread its terror across the region.



Leaders of other African countries, chastened by Nigeria's Biafran experience, became ever-more determined to maintain the integrity of their colonial boundaries. This was not only for administrative convenience and political self-preservation. There was also a widespread feeling among Africa's first generation of independence leaders that they needed national economic and political strength in terms of size – geographic and demographic – in order to hold their own and gain respect on the world stage.

It should be noted that the vast majority of Africa's 55 governments have succeeded in holding their sometimes fragile countries together. But the task of reconciling regional/ethnic and national interests has presented a major challenge to African leaders. For a significant minority, deep-seated national stability remains a dream yet to be realised, and open distrust and violence at election time is not uncommon, as evidenced by the example of Kenya in 2007. There, the post-election violence laid bare the extent of suppressed ethnic distrust and rivalry that still has the potential to

threaten the security and wellbeing of that populous state.

One-party states

Most of the first generation of Africa's ruling politicians quickly rejected multiparty parliamentary democracy as unworkable. With most political parties founded to promote and safeguard regional and ethnic interests, African presidents pleaded the particular circumstances of their country's crying need for national unity in order to achieve rapid social and economic development. Within a few years of independence, most African governments had established some form of 'one-party state'. Among those countries that became independent between 1956 and 1976, only Botswana and Mauritius – both with low populations then of about 1 million people – have maintained an unbroken record of multiparty parliamentary democracy since independence.² The argument in favour of a one-party system was that parliamentary opposition based on regional ethnic interests was destructive rather than constructive opposition. Democratic choice, it was argued, could just as easily be exercised within a single-party system.

In some one-party states, such as Tanzania and Zambia, where there would be several, approved, one-party candidates for each parliamentary seat, elections at least showed that unpopular government ministers could indeed be voted out of office. But an awful lot depended on the political integrity of the party leader and his ability to control the enthusiasms of local party members. More commonly, the one-party system led to an abuse of state power. In countries such as Nkrumah's Ghana, Banda's Malawi or most of the former French colonies, the one-party system was used to give the ruling party dictatorial powers in suppressing any criticism of the government. Many worthy critics of one-party governments found themselves imprisoned without trial or forced into exile in fear for their lives. Regional rebellion or military coup d'état was often seen as the only means of overthrowing an incompetent or unpopular government. The role of the military in African politics will be considered later in the chapter. It is worth observing here that a number of the broad-based, one-party states under widely respected leaders survived without military intervention. Notable among them were Senegal under Senghor, Côte d'Ivoire under Houphouët-Boigny, Kenya under Kenyatta, Tanzania under Nyerere and Zambia under Kaunda. Senghor went on to introduce a modified form of multiparty rule in Senegal in 1975, while Kenya and Tanzania witnessed peaceful

transitions to new civilian presidents on the death of Kenyatta in 1978 and the retirement of Nyerere in 1985. Houphouët-Boigny legalised opposition parties in 1990 and won a dubious election that year before dying in office in 1993. Kaunda similarly clung on until 1990, when rising opposition on the streets forced him to concede the end of one-party rule. The following year he and his party were swept from power in a landslide election.

The economic legacy: underdevelopment and dependency

European colonial governments left Africa with a mounting economic crisis that was the result of 80 years of misrule. The colonial economies, such as they were, had been directed towards exporting cheap agricultural raw materials and unprocessed minerals to Europe and in return importing relatively expensive manufactured goods (see [Chapters 24](#) and [25](#)). There had been little or no attempt to develop African economic self-sufficiency, for that would have defeated Europe's purpose in possessing these colonies. The nature of the products traded and the 'terms of trade' were determined by Europe at the expense of African interests (see [Map 30.2](#)). Prices for Africa's export commodities were controlled in the so-called 'developed economies' of Europe and North America. Thus, in times of depression in the developed industrialised world, Africa was paid less for her exports, while in times of international inflation, Africans had to pay more for their imports. Each year, more and more African effort had to be turned to producing cash crops and minerals for the European market in order to import the same amount of manufactured goods. As a result of these 'adverse terms of trade', Africa was a net exporter of wealth to Europe and North America.

At the same time, as more effort was put into cash crop production and labouring in the mines, subsistence cultivation for Africa's basic food needs was neglected. By the 1950s, Africa had become a net importer of food. In other words, Africans were growing, on average, less than half of their own food needs. The crisis was heightened by the growing level of urban unemployment. From the late 1940s and early 1950s, more and more people migrated to the towns in a desperate attempt to escape increasing rural poverty or forced cropping and forced labour schemes.

Another unwelcome legacy from the colonial period was the state of Africa's transport systems, which were totally inadequate for the

continent's internal development. Most of the railways had been built around the turn of the century, and by independence they were badly in need of repair. Furthermore, the sole consideration in their placement had been to ease the export of the continent's wealth to Europe, linking a country's mines or main areas of cash crops to the sea; for example, Senegal and Mali's groundnuts and cotton, Ghana's gold, Nigeria's tin and groundnuts, Uganda's cotton, and the Congo's and Zambia's copper. Roads were poorly developed and most of Africa's road and rail networks were designed without concern for a country's internal development. In addition, there were virtually no cross-border regional road or rail links to help promote trade between one African country and its neighbours, unless as a route from a landlocked country to the sea, as between Uganda and Kenya. Telecommunications were the same. Internal rural networks were almost nonexistent, and it was easier to telephone from Africa to Europe than it was to telephone from one African capital to that of its next door neighbour.

African governments inherited two particularly repressive economic policies from their colonial predecessors: the poll tax and agricultural marketing boards. The former, in place at independence in every former colonial territory, was charged on all adult males regardless of income. The latter, widespread in former Anglophone colonies that produced large-scale agricultural cash crops, paid fixed low prices to farmers, while selling their produce for higher prices abroad and keeping the difference as government revenue. Both repressive policies provided such important sources of government income that they were initially retained in many countries after independence.

The main features of Africa's export economies, showing principal sources of the major minerals and cash crops



The lack of education was a further debilitating legacy of the colonial period. Across most of tropical Africa, barely 10 per cent of the population was literate at independence.

The early drive for economic development

Around the time of independence, there was a temporary boom in the world prices paid for Africa's principal mineral and agricultural

exports. This factor initially disguised the full extent of the colonially created economic crisis. The continent's new inexperienced rulers had high expectations of what could be achieved with political independence. But their dreams were soon shattered as the depth of the underlying economic crisis became apparent. To make matters worse, the new rulers of independent Africa made the initial mistake of modelling their development programmes on the industrialised economies of Western Europe and North America. In this they were strongly advised by European economic 'experts'. The theory was simple: Europe was 'developed', Africa was 'underdeveloped'. Therefore, to rectify the problem, Africa must copy the European model of urban-centred industrialisation. African leaders accepted the model because they saw rapid industrialisation as the means to achieve economic self-sufficiency. If African countries industrialised, then they could manufacture their own consumer goods, which, until then, had been imported from Europe. This, in due course, would shift the 'adverse terms of trade' in Africa's favour and so halt the drain of African wealth to the already 'developed' world. But it did not work out like that.

On the one hand, early schemes for industrialisation were far too ambitious and often inappropriate for the needs and resources of the country. On the other hand, Africans had to import all the expertise, technology, machinery and building materials from Europe and North America. The same applied to the improved health, education and transport facilities that Africa's new leaders were determined to provide for their people.

Figure 30.1 Women weeding crops in Zimbabwe. Women are the predominant agricultural workers in Africa, a point often overlooked by agricultural 'experts' and government planners.



Source: © LesleyMcIntyre/Eye Ubiquitous/Hutchison. Reproduced with permission.

Within a very few years, African governments had run up huge new debts with the ‘developed’ world. The result was the need for ever-greater exports of cash crops and minerals to finance the debts. The old colonial trading pattern was continued, and the adverse terms of trade got worse. The industries set up with European and American capital and expertise were those that suited Europe and America rather than Africa. The history of Ghana’s Volta Aluminium Company (known as VALCO) clearly illustrates the problem. The Ghanaian government provided VALCO with very cheap electricity in the belief that it would use its factory to process Ghana’s own bauxite (aluminium ore). But the American company that controlled VALCO used its Ghanaian factory to cheaply process its own bauxite stocks, which it had imported from Jamaica. When, in the early 1980s, the price of electricity to VALCO was increased to nearer its real cost level, the factory closed down.

Even where African governments partially or wholly nationalised mining companies, as many did, the marketing and prices paid for exports were still controlled from the financial centres of the ‘developed’ world. The Ghanaian leader Nkrumah coined the term ‘neocolonialism’ to describe Europe’s continuing economic control over politically independent Africa.³

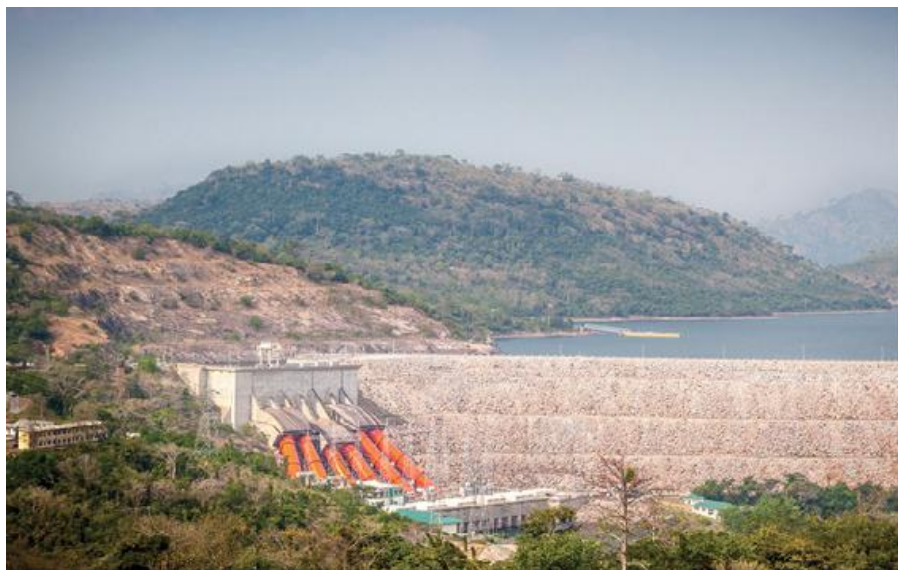
The French in particular maintained close control over the economies of their former tropical African colonies, with the exception of Guinea, which had voted ‘Non’ to de Gaulle in 1958 (see [Chapter](#)). The other French-speaking countries remained part of the

financial French franc zone. While this made it easier for them to attract outside investment from French companies, it tied their trading priorities to the former ‘mother country’. This was particularly important to France, for whom Africa was a major source of vital minerals, such as uranium for nuclear fuel from Gabon and Niger, phosphates from Mauritania and potash from the People’s Republic of the Congo (so named from 1970 to 1991, now the Republic of the Congo). Also important to France were Africa’s cotton from the Sahel, timber from the tropical forests of Gabon and Côte d’Ivoire, and the tropical fruits and vegetable oils of Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal. France, as the major aid donor and source of loans for these countries, exercised considerable control over development projects. These were thus geared towards the continued export of raw materials to France. A number of Francophone African governments provided France with important military bases and the French government was not beyond intervening directly where it decided French interests were at stake. French troops, for instance, played a direct role in propping up pro-French regimes in Zaire (renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997), Gabon and Chad. And in a surprising volte-face, French troops helped oust the notorious regime of self-styled ‘emperor’ Jean-Bedel Bokassa from the Central African Republic.

By the mid-1960s, it was becoming clear that independent Africa had, in the words of the widely experienced French agronomist René Dumont, made a ‘false start’.⁴ The governments of those countries that had achieved independence around 1960, especially in west Africa, had spent lavishly on expensive industrial and prestige projects with insufficient concern for their appropriateness. Ghana’s Akosombo Dam was a case in point ([Figure 30.2](#)). This huge hydroelectric project saddled Ghana with a crippling international debt and, in the short term, provided little practical advantage for the majority of Ghanaian people. For various reasons, much of it to do with failures in central government’s long-term planning and the inappropriateness of European ‘expert’ advice, Ghana’s anticipated industrial revolution failed to take off. Nevertheless, despite the debt and some technical difficulties with power generation and the falling levels of Akosombo Lake in times of drought, Nkrumah’s long-term vision did make possible the widespread electrification of Ghana’s rural towns in the 1990s.

Figure 30.2 Ghana’s Akosombo Dam. Intended to provide electricity for Ghana’s industrial revolution, the dam and power station were opened by President Nkrumah in February 1966, in what turned out to

be his last official duty before he was overthrown in a coup. The lake created behind the dam was at the time the largest man-made lake in the world.



Source: EunikaSopotnicka/iStock.

Meanwhile, the Ghanaian government had failed to encourage investment in the country's former great economic success story, cocoa farming. By the 1970s, Ghana's ageing cocoa trees were past their most productive. Virtually no new trees had been planted since independence and the government had failed to encourage the country's young to seek a future in the cocoa industry. Thus Ghana was unable to achieve economic recovery during the boom in cocoa prices in the late 1970s, which so benefited her neighbour, Cote d'Ivoire.

At independence, the vast majority of Africa's population was still based in the rural areas, at least partially dependent on producing their own food. But the new governments were usually dominated by an educated urban élite that often scorned the rural peasant as backward and unproductive. But they themselves failed to invest surplus government funds or expensive foreign loans in that one sector of the population which, in the past, had ensured some level of economic self-sufficiency. On the contrary, they maintained the restrictive agricultural marketing boards they had inherited from colonial regimes, which continued to ensure that small-scale peasant farmers who produced a food surplus received little reward for their product. The example of Zambia amply illustrates the trend.

The independent state of Zambia had been born in 1964 with, in the later words of President Kaunda, 'a copper spoon in its mouth'. With soaring copper prices from the 1950s through to 1973, at independence Zambia had huge reserves of foreign exchange. But this was at the expense of an overreliance on the single industry of copper mining: in 1970, copper accounted for 92 per cent of foreign earnings and 53 per cent of total government income. Zambia spent lavishly on free education and health services and a whole range of prestige urban building projects. But there was little effort to diversify the economy and no effective investment in peasant food cultivation. In fact, the retention from colonial times of government-controlled marketing boards actually stifled peasant farming initiatives. The civil service boomed and the rapid expansion of non-technical education drained people away from the rural areas. Almost without realising it, Zambia – a huge, formerly self-sufficient agricultural country with low population – quickly became a net importer of food.

In 1970, the Zambian government nationalised the copper mines, paying the multinational mining companies a large part of the country's foreign exchange reserves for a 51 per cent stake in the industry. Kaunda and his colleagues believed it was in the interests of national security for the Zambian government, and hence in theory the people, to gain control over the nation's principal industrial resource. Soon after that had been achieved, however, following Pinochet's coup in Chile in September 1973, Chile broke away from the international copper marketing cartel and the world price of copper collapsed. Combined with the effects of the oil price rises of the same year and economic sanctions against its former close trading partner 'Southern Rhodesia', Zambia went into a spiral of decline and indebtedness from which it had only begun to recover by the beginning of the new millennium.

Meanwhile, in much of tropical west Africa, it was plain for all to see that corruption within government had become widespread. While the majority rural population remained relatively poor and urban unemployment continued to rise, government ministers, civil servants and other branches of the minority educated élite were becoming increasingly wealthy. Indeed, it has been argued within some African countries that the educated élite of the post-independence era had, in practice, done little more than replace white colonial rulers with black 'colonial' rulers.

The apparent inability of many of Africa's new political masters to do much beyond enrich themselves coincided in the mid-1960s with a dramatic fall in world commodity prices for Africa's principal agricultural exports. Manufactured imports, on which Africa had

become so dependent, thus became relatively much more expensive. Many countries now had to cut back on imports, no matter how much they needed them. Inflation rose rapidly and there were shortages of goods in the shops. Everybody but the politicians seemed to be getting worse and worse off. Was this the development and prosperity that politicians had promised at independence? With parliamentary opposition already largely suppressed, the spate of military takeovers that swept western and central Africa in the mid-1960s was, in the circumstances, hardly very surprising.

The role of the military in African politics

Most of the French-speaking states, with the notable exceptions of Guinea, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, went over to military rule during the 1960s. Togo and Dahomey (renamed Benin in 1974) suffered frequent military coups and counter-coups. From November 1965, coup followed coup with frightening regularity, taking in Nigeria and Ghana in early 1966. By the early 1970s, military rule had become a serious African political option. It remained the most frequent means for change of government through the 1970s and 80s.

Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya, the three former British-ruled east African states, could have fallen to military coup following an army mutiny in each of the newly independent countries in January 1964. In the colonial period, the British had used African soldiers for the defence and internal security of these colonies. Arming and training African soldiers presented a potential threat to British overrule and the colonial authorities maintained security through a mix of financial rewards, isolation and harsh discipline. Colonial soldiery was a prestige occupation and, at independence, African soldiers expected to maintain this prestige through promotion into the officer class and improved conditions of service. In contrast, what they saw at independence was a loss of prestige and the rewards going to civilian politicians and the civil service. Combined with a loosening of restrictive regulations, it was a recipe for mutiny, and one followed the other in quick succession in the last week of January 1964. The new independence leaders had to accept the humiliation of asking the former colonial power to help restore order. What might have developed into a coup was avoided, at least until January 1971 when that classic example of a corrupt and ambitious colonial army officer, Idi Amin, seized power in Uganda.

As a serious political option, a number of interesting features can

be observed about Africa's military regimes. First, it should be remembered that the military had often played a powerful role in the politics of the major precolonial states. Second, the armies inherited at independence had generally been founded originally as part of the process of initial colonial conquest. And, apart from the two world wars, Africa's armies in the colonial period had mainly been held in reserve for internal use against potential rebellious subjects rather than for defence of the country against potential hostile neighbours. At independence, they had little initial role to play beyond being part of the trappings of an independent nation-state. An interesting exception was Seychelles, where there had been no army at all at independence. Prime Minister René staged his coup in 1977 with only a handful of colleagues who, with a little training and some rifles smuggled in from Tanzania, seized the police armoury. It was only after the coup that the Seychelles state needed an army, to defend itself from potential counter-coups.

In general in the 1960s, military coups d'état were reactions against inefficient and corrupt civilian regimes. As such, most coups against civilian regimes were initially welcomed by the public. At least until they got into power, the military were known to be well disciplined and usually free of corruption. A couple of examples must suffice to show the trend.

In Nigeria, the widespread belief that the elections of 1964–5 had been rigged finally destroyed the credibility of civilian government. But the first army coup of January 1966 was followed by another in July, amid fears of ethnic domination by Igbo southeasterners or Hausa northerners. The massacre of 20,000 Igbo living in the northern region led directly to the Biafran secession and subsequent civil war of 1967–70. Thus, it was General Gowon, who had seized power in the counter-coup of July 1966, who steered Nigeria through the consequences of its political inheritance, which squabbling multiparty civilian politicians had done nothing to improve.

Gowon subsequently achieved the outward appearance of some level of postwar reconciliation, but during the early 1970s, his government grew increasingly inefficient and divorced from the needs of the country. This led to his overthrow by General Murtala Muhammed in July 1975. Muhammed restored moral authority to the government. He embarked on a series of reforms of the administration and set a timetable for a return to civilian rule in 1979. At the same time, he began to tackle the corruption and inefficiency that had led to the crippling backlog of cargo ships in the port of Lagos. The vulnerability of African governments to military intervention was starkly revealed, however, when this popular and widely respected

military leader was assassinated by a group of envious middle-ranking officers in February 1976. However, their attempted coup was in fact foiled and General Obasanjo took over. He continued Murtala Muhammed's reforming policies and returned the country to civilian rule in 1979.

The Nigerian civilian government of 1979–83 was the time of greatest freedom in Nigerian history in terms of press freedom and toleration of official opposition. But it was also the time of greatest licence for systematic state corruption, the self-enrichment of officials and the wasting of Nigeria's huge new oil revenues, via the siphoning off of revenue by a few senior politicians. Within a few years, the personal greed displayed by individuals in civilian authority had crippled what should have been a thriving Nigerian economy. Once again, the return of the military in 1983 was initially welcomed as a restoration of moral authority and discipline in public life. This time, however, an increasingly corrupt and unpopular military was to remain in power through a succession of rulers until 1998.

Similarly, in Ghana, corruption, lavish spending and intolerance of criticism led to the welcome overthrow of Nkrumah in February 1966. For some time, there had been a growing feeling among Ghanaians that Nkrumah was directing too much of his energies into being an international statesman and ignoring his own country's mounting economic problems. But there were additional specific military grievances leading to the February coup. These were related to proposed cuts in the defence budget, the effects of inflation on the declining wages of army officers, and alleged government interference in the day-to-day running of the army. Furthermore, there were fears among the military that the army, which had served with the UN in the former Belgian Congo, might be sent to 'Rhodesia' to fight against the Smith regime, which had made an illegal declaration of independence (UDI) from Britain in November 1965.

Having forced Nkrumah into exile in Guinea and purged the civil service of his political supporters, the military regime in Ghana was the first in independent Africa to 'recivilianise', in 1969. The government of the veteran 'Gold Coast' politician Dr Kofi A. Busia, however, proved quite unable to solve Ghana's mounting economic problems in the face of a further sharp fall in the world price of cocoa. The army returned to power under Colonel Ignatius Acheampong in 1972.

Once again, specific military grievances, including further cuts in the military budget, seem to have prompted the army into action. But Acheampong was unable to halt Ghana's overall economic decline, and Ghana, like most other African countries, was hit by the huge rise

in oil prices in 1973–4. With rapidly rising inflation and the blatant wealthy living of certain army officers, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings seized power in 1979 in what proved to be a brief ‘cleansing exercise’. He honoured the previous military commitment to return the country to civilian rule within three months, but not before three former military heads of state, including Acheampong, were publicly executed by firing squad for corrupt practices. Again, the new civilian government was not up to the urgent task of halting the country’s decline, and the politically radicalised Rawlings seized power again in December 1981. This time, Rawlings proclaimed a ‘people’s revolution’ and a purging of the old élites. For the next decade, Rawlings provided the leadership and much of the harsh economic restructuring that was needed, but at a heavy cost in terms of individual human rights and democratic freedoms. He returned the country to multiparty civilian rule, with himself as elected civilian head of state in 1992.

It should not be concluded from the above that the military in African politics was necessarily a positive force for African development. Military rulers were just as likely to be corrupt and tyrannical as their civilian counterparts. The year 1979 saw the downfall of three of Africa’s most corrupt and tyrannical regimes, that of General ‘Emperor’ Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic (1966–79), Field Marshal, ‘President for Life’ Idi Amin of Uganda (1971–9) and civilian President dictator Francisco Macías Nguema of Equatorial (former ‘Spanish’) Guinea (1968–79). Bokassa squandered huge sums of his poor country’s revenue on himself and his friends, including his own notorious imperial coronation and his gift of diamonds to the president of France. Amin and Macías Nguema were both responsible for the torture and death of untold thousands of real and imagined opponents of their brutal dictatorial regimes. Amin’s regime is generally credited with having looted and destroyed what was once regarded as one of Africa’s most thriving, agriculturally based economies.

The socialist alternative

So far, we have seen African independence governments struggling with and generally failing to overcome the problems of uneven development and the export-oriented economies they had inherited from colonial regimes. It was left to Nyerere of Tanzania to chart a bold new course and try to take African development in an entirely new direction.

The Arusha Declaration

Since independence in 1963, President Julius Nyerere had embarked on a policy of local self-help in which he sought to persuade rural communities to become self-sufficient in food production and, through local entrepreneurship, to contribute to the costs of their own schools and health clinics. Encouraged by Dumont's 'false start' thesis, first published in French in 1962 and in English in 1966 (see footnote 4 in this chapter), Nyerere developed his localisation ideas into what became the Arusha Declaration of 1967. The Arusha document inspired radical thinkers across the continent and made Dar es Salaam a centre of African socialist thought. In the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere laid down the principles by which he sought to reverse the trend of African development as being based on the European model of capitalist industrialisation. He saw Africa growing poorer and less able to feed itself, while private greed was increasing class divisions within African society. He was determined to end this 'fattening of the élite'.

The concept of 'African socialism' had evolved among African nationalists of the 1950s as a reaction to the capitalist exploitation of colonial rule. But most independence leaders, with the notable exception of Guinea's Sékou Touré, paid little more than lip service to socialist principles. Nyerere, on the other hand, believed that in the Arusha Declaration he had a blueprint for its practical implementation. However, he had a naive and idealistic view of African precolonial society, in which 'traditional' village communities operated their own proto-socialist principles of communal cooperation.

Tanzanian socialism was to be based on local resources rather than imported, high-technology industrialisation. The country's main banks and foreign-owned capitalist companies were to be 'nationalised' (taken over and run by the state on behalf of the people), while a 'leadership code' banned political leaders from accumulating private wealth. The focus of government policy was to be on rural development, leading to self-reliance.

Ujamaa

The main plank of Nyerere's scheme, and the one that ultimately led to its downfall, was the policy of 'villagisation'. The problem, as Nyerere saw it, was that most Tanzanians were dispersed in small and remote villages, beyond the reach of his perception of modern development. But, if they were brought together into larger villages, it

would be easier for government to provide better water, health and education facilities as well as better roads and rural markets, combined with agricultural advice and improved technology. It would also bring them under greater government control, thus enabling government to counter what Nyerere and his acolytes regarded as their regressive conservative ideas. The policy was known as *ujamaa*, variously translated as ‘familyhood’, ‘self-help’ or ‘mutual cooperation’.

The contradiction within Nyerere’s scheme was that he, an urban intellectual, still believed that the capitalist/communist model of large-scale, intensive ‘modern’ agriculture was the most efficient way to increase agricultural production. Exploiting the African tradition of communal labour in times of need, such as harvest or clearing of new land, Nyerere dictated that each *ujamaa* village would have a large stretch of agricultural land that was to be worked by the communal labour of the village. The added productivity of scale would produce a surplus that could be sold by the community to the towns or for export, with profits shared among the villagers. This was perhaps the issue most resented by the rural recipients of Nyerere’s scheme, because they were not ‘collective farmers’. The true tradition of African farming was that of a collection of small, independent, farming entrepreneurs, who happened to appreciate that it was in their own best interests to help each other in times of need. They knew full well that large-scale agriculture was no more productive per hectare than what could be achieved by experienced, small-scale peasant farmers, able to access the labour of an extended family. And the evidence was to prove them right.

A further contradiction within Tanzania’s *ujamaa* was that it was self-help imposed from above. In practice, peasant cultivators were reluctant to move from areas where their ancestors were buried and where their families had successfully grown crops for generations. They were also reluctant to give up the personal security of private plots for the sake of communal ones. When persuasion would not work, the government turned to compulsory ‘villagisation’, and through the mid-1970s, some 5 million people were moved, often against their will, into *ujamaa* villages. There were 8,000 such villages by 1977.

Figure 30.3 President Nyerere (posing for a publicity photo) working in a Tanzanian *ujamaa* village, loading clay into wooden moulds for making bricks. In the background, clay bricks are drying in the sun before stacking for firing.



Source: Keystone Pictures USA/Alamy Stock Photo.

Compulsory villagisation, controlled by urban bureaucrats, was, in essence, oppressive and often inefficient. Populations were sometimes moved in before roads, markets and public welfare facilities in new villages were ready. There followed severe rural shortages of basic commodities such as paraffin, soap and sugar. Government and party officials portrayed peasants as backward and ignorant, not able to understand and accept the advantages of villagisation. But the peasants understood their situation only too well. Some families had been moved off good land on to poorer; the new agricultural ‘experts’

did not necessarily know best. By the 1980s, it was clear that the villagisation experiment was not working and peasant knowledge and experience began to regain some respect. The government was forced to ease up on the rigid dogma of the 1970s. The communal aspect was wound down, and individual peasant farmers were allowed to return to cultivating their own plots of land, some becoming prosperous petty capitalists, growing cash crops for export.

On a national scale, Tanzania in the 1980s remained one of the poorest countries in Africa. It had huge foreign debts and was still dependent on exporting agricultural raw materials – coffee, cotton, sisal – at prices controlled outside Africa. But its production of food crops had not deteriorated, as in many other parts of Africa. It had avoided the massive accumulation of landless rural poverty and mass urban unemployment, which characterised its nationally more prosperous neighbour Kenya. And Tanzania had succeeded in providing the mass of rural people with vastly improved welfare services: clean water and free health and education facilities.

Nyerere retired voluntarily from the presidency in 1985 (a rare occurrence in African politics at that stage), although he remained an influential figure as head of the ruling party. His successors have moved the party away from socialism and the one-party state. They have liberalised the economy and the constitution, and from 1995 Nyerere's Chama Cha Mapinduzi party went on to win successive multiparty elections.

Socialism from liberation struggle

The governments of those countries that had achieved independence through guerrilla struggle – Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe – based their subsequent development on various local adaptations of basically socialist principles. Algeria was fortunate in having great oil wealth that could be used for diversifying the economy. The building of a giant Algerian steel mill in the 1970s was an important step in Africa's growing industrialisation. The regime in Guinea-Bissau became increasingly dictatorial and largely lost contact with its original grassroots support. Angola had great economic potential as its basically rural economy was supported by substantial mineral wealth, especially in oil. But, like Mozambique, Angolan development was persistently disrupted by the military activity of South African-backed rebels, determined to prevent the establishment of thriving socialist economies so close to South Africa's borders.

In Zimbabwe, the road to socialist development was fraught with

difficulties. The fundamental problem facing Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) government at independence in 1980 was the disparity of landownership. The vast majority of the country's viable arable land was in the hands of a tiny minority of white settlers. And land was what the vast majority of war veterans of the 1970s' liberation war had been fighting for. Initially, however, Mugabe was reluctant to disturb the status quo, as the white-owned commercial farms grew most of the country's food and their tobacco products were Zimbabwe's principal foreign exchange earners. Believing that international aid would, in due course, help buy out the white farmers, Mugabe allowed the issue to drift. He preferred to focus his attention on security issues, sending his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade into the Ndebele western region in 1982, in the name of suppressing supposed ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) dissidents. Political and regional rivalry between ZANU and ZAPU had bedevilled the struggle against the white-minority government (Mugabe's Fifth Brigade remained in 'Matabeleland' for five years, committing massacres and atrocities until, in 1987, Joshua Nkomo felt driven to subsume ZAPU into ZANU-PF).

Meanwhile, Mugabe's policy of providing universal free education was paying dividends, but not in the way he intended. In the late 1990s, rising levels of unemployment in the urban areas put Mugabe's government under increasing political pressure from a well-educated, articulate, urban electorate. It was in these circumstances that Mugabe chose to return to the 'unfinished business' of land redistribution. When white farmers refused to accept Mugabe's offer of compulsory purchase of their landholdings at well below market rates, Mugabe told them to turn to the British government for compensation, because it was British 'pioneers' who had seized African land in the nineteenth century.

With the situation at stalemate, the government allowed self-professed 'war veterans' to begin the violent occupation of white-owned land, forcing most of their owners to abandon their farms. The anarchic manner of the 'land redistribution' enabled ZANU-PF youth to terrorise the rural areas and thus ensure ZANU-PF victory in subsequent elections. Meanwhile, agricultural production was seriously disrupted, foreign capital fled the country, currency exchange rates and inflation soared and the economy virtually collapsed. Mugabe, in denial about the economic chaos around him and the political violence that was keeping him in power, nevertheless stuck to his anti-colonial rhetoric and blamed the British government for most of Zimbabwe's woes, while most of the best former white-owned farms were forcibly transferred into the hands of Mugabe's

ruling élite.

Spontaneous political violence by ZANU-PF zealots against the main opposition party, and any other critic of the government, had reached such a height around the 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections that in the election that followed in 2013, little direct incitement to further violence was needed to ensure Mugabe and ZANU-PF an overwhelming victory. Meanwhile, the people's poverty and suffering contrasted obscenely with the ageing president's lavish annual birthday party. Even as internal rivalry over the succession threatened to split the party, Mugabe still defiantly proclaimed that only death would separate him from the presidency, until he was eventually ousted in 2017 at the age of 94. This was partly brought about through manoeuvring for the succession by Grace Mugabe, his much younger wife. She went a step too far in the first week of November 2017 when she engineered the ousting of Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa, her main rival. Mnangagwa, a former defence minister, had widespread army support and while he waited in temporary exile in South Africa, the generals staged what was widely portrayed by ecstatic urban crowds as a 'constitutional coup'. Mugabe and Grace were put under house arrest. A week later Mugabe was pressured into resignation and restored 'Vice President' Mnangagwa was constitutionally sworn in as his successor.



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CHAPTER 31

The challenges and dilemmas of development: debt and international aid

Historians of the future, looking back on the early decades of African independence, are likely to highlight its achievements. They will be able to contrast its levels of health, education, economic, social and political development very favourably with the neglect, oppression and exploitation of the previous 100 years. Nevertheless, there is no denying that Africa faces very grave problems in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Two major factors stifling African development have been international debt and, perversely as it may seem, international aid.

Debt

At independence, much of Africa lacked the accumulated capital for investment, and high rates of poverty meant that there was a very small base to build this capital reserve through personal taxation. With low levels of income, governments took on large debt commitments in the belief that ‘development’ would soon render the debt burden negligible. But development for the masses was not that easy to achieve. As we have seen ([Chapter 30](#)), ruling urban élites tended to favour industrialisation and large prestige projects, neglecting the development of the rural regions where, in those early decades, the vast majority of the population lived. And, with improved health services tackling infant and maternal mortality, those population levels were rising dramatically.

By the 1970s, African indebtedness had reached crisis proportions. At the root of the problem lay continuing adverse terms of trade that

saw the value of Africa's exports consistently falling in relation to the cost of manufactured imports. The descent into chronic indebtedness, however, was hastened dramatically by the tripling of oil prices in 1973–4. This was before the west African oil boom of the 1980s. Nigerian oil was only just beginning to come on-stream. The oil price hike left most tropical African countries critically short of foreign currency reserves. And as the industrialised world slipped temporarily into recession and inflation rose, Africa's adverse terms of trade only got worse. At the same time, however, international banks based in the industrialised world, fed by a decade of high inflation and high interest rates, were overflowing with funds looking for places to lend. African governments, verging on bankruptcy, found the international banking system only too eager to lend them money, with a recklessness and lack of security that would not be seen again until the run-up to the world financial crisis of 2007–8.

By the 1980s, a dangerous pattern had emerged. African governments were spending a disproportionate amount of their meagre foreign reserves servicing debts at the expense of essential imports. Basic commodities like washing powder, sugar and school books were in short supply or nonexistent and burgeoning businesses were being crippled. Governments turned to the IMF (International Monetary Fund) for emergency foreign reserves and further loans to help pay the interest on loans that were already too large for them ever to pay off.

Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs)

The World Bank's attitude was summed up in its 1981 Berg Report, which blamed Africa's economic woes on the profligacy and incompetence of Africa's leaders. African leaders had already (in April 1980) provided a theoretical alternative solution to the crisis, in the shape of the Lagos Plan of Action. This aimed to increase the self-sufficiency of individual African countries while reforming African internal governance. Although welcomed in principle by African heads of state, the Lagos Plan of Action had no follow-up mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the plan and it received little more than lip service from national governments.

This left the field open for the IMF and World Bank. The programmes they recommended, and for which the World Bank provided investment capital in the guise of 'international aid', were concerned almost exclusively with maximising Africa's exports. And before providing any funds, the IMF and World Bank laid down a set

of conditions. These ‘conditionalities’ were applied universally and reflected the government, banking and business practices of the developed, industrialised world, rather than the particular needs of the developing countries concerned.

The principal preconditions for these Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were threefold. First, cut government spending, which meant a drastic cut in a whole range of government services, including health, education, agricultural expertise and food subsidies. The latter, which led to a doubling of the price of many basic foods, resulted in urban riots in Tunisia and Zambia in the mid-1980s forcing Presidents Bourguiba and Kaunda respectively to restore the subsidies. Second, devalue the national currency. This would increase the value of African exports but, at the same time, it would increase the cost of imports, especially manufactured consumer goods, leading to local shortages and inflation. And third, allow a free flow of capital, in and out of the country. This was supposed to encourage greater foreign investment in Africa. In practice, it meant that Africans lost a large measure of control over their own economies as foreign investors were free to remove their capital and their profits as and when they wanted. Predictably, the foreign capital that did come in was mostly invested in primary, extractive industries, such as gold in Ghana, oil in Nigeria, copper in Congo/Zaire and timber in Gabon and Zimbabwe.

Figure 31.1 Loading hardwood for export at the Victoria Falls marshalling yard, Zimbabwe.



Source: Jan and Fiona Teede/Art Directors & Trip. Reproduced with permission.

By the early 1990s, most sub-Saharan African countries were saddled with these SAPs. And with the SAP focus on maximising foreign exchange through exports, much of the best agricultural land was set aside for export crops, from roses in Kenya to cotton in Niger. Expensive new irrigation projects were instigated to support these crops. Subsistence farmers were pushed onto marginal land, previously used for pasture, while pastoralists were, in turn, squeezed ever closer to the desert. In 1984, Niger produced bumper crops of cotton in a year of extreme drought, while local food crops failed and pastoralists lost up to 90 per cent of their livestock. A small local minority gained some prosperity, interest was paid to foreign banks and the bulk of the population faced starvation. In the early twenty-first century, through the international debt system, Africa was still a net exporter of her wealth to Europe and North America.

Extract from a speech by Thomas Sankara, head of state, Burkina Faso, addressing the Organisation of African Unity, Addis Ababa, 29 July 1987:1

The debt is another form of neo-colonialism, one in which the colonialists have transformed themselves into technical assistants. Actually, it would be more accurate to say technical assassins. ...

The debt in its present form is a cleverly organized re-conquest of Africa under which our growth and development are regulated by stages and norms totally alien to us. It is a re-conquest that turns each of us into a financial slave ... of those who had the opportunity, the craftiness, the deceitfulness to invest funds in our countries that we are obliged to repay. ...

The debt cannot be repaid, first of all because if we don't pay, the lenders won't die. ... On the other hand, if we do pay, we are the ones who will die. ... Those who led us into debt were gambling, as if they were in a casino. As long as they were winning, there was no problem. Now that they're losing their bets, they demand repayment. There is talk of a crisis. No, Mr President. They gambled. They lost. Those are the rules of the game. Life goes on. [Applause]

Three months later, Sankara was assassinated in a counter-coup by his military colleague Blaise Campaoré.

The CFA franc zone

The majority of Francophone African countries have had a slightly different economic experience since independence in 1960. Although the basic overdependence on raw material exports and foreign investment has been the same, the former members of French West and Equatorial Africa have had a common currency, the *Communauté Financière Africaine* (CFA) franc. From 1947 until January 1994, the CFA franc was tied to, and interchangeable with, the French franc (at a fixed rate of 50 CFA francs to 1 French franc). This provided the 14 African countries concerned with a degree of economic stability in terms of dependable foreign investment. At the same time, however, it tied them financially and economically to France and thus it was French interests that predominated. Africans in the CFA zone sold their cocoa, coffee, cotton, groundnuts, timber, oil, uranium and manganese to France. They received considerable French investment, but it was almost exclusively funnelled into those primary industries. At the same time, since France insisted that 65 per cent of CFA foreign reserves be held in French francs, the CFA countries received virtually all their consumer imports from France. It was ‘neocolonialism’ par excellence. It was also a serious barrier to greater economic integration across the west African region. Only 7 per cent of CFA trade in the 1980s was within the west African zone.

By the early 1990s, the CFA franc had become seriously overvalued, especially in relationship to neighbouring Anglophone countries. This meant that producers of export crops were being underpaid in CFA francs, while imports from France were relatively cheap. The latter had led to an overdependence on French consumer goods, at the expense of local industry, and a high proportion of foreign exchange was spent on luxury French foods for the urban élites of Dakar, Abidjan and Yaoundé. Meanwhile, French interest in Africa was waning as it concentrated its economic energies on European integration. With less investment capital coming from France, governments of the CFA zone were obliged to turn to the IMF. It was thus under pressure from the IMF, and with the approval of the Bank of France, that Francophone African governments hesitantly accepted a dramatic devaluation of the CFA franc by 100 per cent in

January 1994, just one month after that doyen of Franco-African close relations, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, president of Côte d'Ivoire, had died. The political instability that followed the overnight doubling of import prices was predictable and almost inevitable.

Globalisation

By the dawn of the new century, a new word had come to replace SAPs in the industrial world's prescriptions for Africa – 'globalisation'. This was coupled with an insistence that in the new electronic age of the internet, capital and goods must be allowed to flow freely around the world with no trade barriers between states. It was argued by the world's most powerful industrial nations that globalisation would benefit the poorer nations of Africa because they would be able to sell their goods in the rich markets of the industrial world. African countries would thus 'trade' their way out of poverty. In practice, it did not work out like that. In order to gain access to these rich markets, African countries have had to open up their own economies and services to foreign private competition. They have had to remove trade barriers designed to protect their weak emerging industries and agriculture and force them to compete openly with the 'world market'. Thus, for example, Mauritania was persuaded to lease its valuable Atlantic fishing grounds to Spanish industrial fishing fleets. The government received money for the lease, but local Mauritanian fishermen were driven out of business and were no longer able to feed their families on their own fresh fish. This pattern was repeated in many coastal countries around the continent.

Globalisation was not only neocolonialism in new clothes, it has also been hypocritical; for while African farmers were left wide open to world competition, the farmers of the European Union and North America were heavily protected and subsidised. Thus, they have been allowed – even encouraged – to produce more than they could ever sell domestically and have dumped the surplus on the world market, driving African farmers out of business.

In the twenty-first century, within this globalisation climate, global capitalist investors have been buying up vast tracts of African land – across the tropical continent, from Senegal to Mozambique. And they have been doing it with the cooperation of weak African governments. The investors expect to make large profits, especially from the growing of crops such as palm oil for biofuels. Meanwhile, China and some of the oil-rich nations of western Asia have, for some years, bought up land in countries such as Sudan and Tanzania in order to

grow food for their own populations. All of this 'land grabbing' activity takes valuable land out of the hands of African producers, driving ever-more former farmers into urban shanty towns, while others have become employees of multinational agribusiness corporations. Although providing some local employment, this further reduces Africa's chances of gaining control over her own self-sufficiency in food – a basic requirement for any meaningful development.

In 2005, the world's leading industrialised countries agreed to some substantial levels of debt relief, but on the condition that their interpretation of 'good governance' was met. The dramatic fall in mineral and other commodity prices following the world financial crisis of 2007–8, and the slowdown in China's growth from 2015, has meant that some anticipated debt relief has not come on-stream and where it has, African governments have found themselves hard-pressed to benefit greatly from it.

International aid

The subject of international aid has become a controversial topic where discussion of Africa's economic development is concerned. It is often pointed out in western political forums that Africa has received a huge amount of aid over the past half-century and yet there is precious little to show for it. The implication of this scenario is that Africans are to blame for not using their aid more wisely. Why, western politicians and voters ask, does Africa keep needing emergency aid to cope with famines, such as those affecting Somalia in 2011 and 2017?

Too often in these discussions general international aid to Africa is equated with emergency aid. The two are quite distinct. Emergency aid undoubtedly saves many lives in famine situations. The main criticism levelled at emergency 'disaster relief' aid is that a predictable situation, often associated with armed conflict in a marginal environment, is left to fester into a disaster before international emergency funds are raised to deal with the result. Furthermore, the amount of publicity given to international fundraising, with harrowing pictures of starving children, helps to reinforce in the world's media a very negative, backward and helpless image of Africa as a whole. Nevertheless, disaster aid will still be needed for as long as there are disasters. What Africa needs is development that will prevent disasters. So, why has general international aid over more than 50 years not achieved this?

At independence in the 1950s and 60s, Africa's new leaders demanded aid from their former colonial masters. They needed capital in order to make the kind of physical infrastructure and educational and health investment that the colonial powers had neglected to do during the 70 years they were in control. It was, in effect, a debt owed to Africa as compensation for the blatant exploitation of colonial rule. The arrangement suited the former colonial powers, as it enabled them to ensure that their former colonies remained dependent on them, which guaranteed them continued access to Africa's resources.

The way it has developed since then stems from the fact that government to government (bilateral) aid has never been designed or intended to develop complete independent self-sufficiency for the recipient African nation. Much of the aid has been in the form of loans, which laid the basis for Africa's chronic indebtedness. The reckless lending by international banks in the 1970s has already been commented on. Since the IMF and the World Bank stepped in in the 1980s, too many African governments have become addicted to automatic inflows of international aid. This has cushioned them from the harsh realities of what their country can really afford. At the same time, it has divorced them from accountability to their own people. In line with the old maxim, 'He who pays the piper calls the tune', major aid donors tend to dictate Africa's development goals.

It can be argued that African countries are poor because the international trading and commodity market system of globalisation does not pay African producers a fair price for their hard-won resources. And if this means that impoverished Africa must receive aid from the developed industrial world, then that is merely compensation for the low prices still being paid for Africa's raw materials. It has already been observed that even in the twenty-first century, Africa pays out more annually to western banks than she receives from western aid donors. In effect, this means that international aid to Africa, far from compensating Africa for past underdevelopment, in fact just acts as a subsidy to multinational banks.

It is for reasons such as this that some African economists now argue that international aid to Africa must be brought to an end, and African governments must focus on planning for development without international aid. Under these circumstances, corrupt African politicians would lose a source of funds they have been siphoning off into foreign bank accounts for years, and all politicians would be much more answerable to their electorates. This greater accountability could only lead in the long term to greater political stability.

African international cooperation

Pan-Africanism

Kwame Nkrumah was one of Africa's most dedicated Pan-Africanists. In December 1958, he hosted the first of several All African People's Conferences in the Ghanaian capital Accra. It was attended by African nationalists from all over the continent, vowing continental solidarity in their respective struggles for independence. Inspired by the success of the conference, Nkrumah was determined to take the Pan-African concept much further. Greatly influenced by his educational experience in the USA, he believed that the only way to achieve complete political and economic freedom from European domination was to create a powerful new 'United States of Africa'. Then, through continent-wide cooperation, Africa would really be able to take its place on the world stage on terms of equality. In unity, Nkrumah saw strength, but in practical terms his dream proved illusory. At home in Ghana, Nkrumah himself only achieved the appearance of internal political unity by suppressing regional Asante opposition. On the wider continent, individual African states and their newly independent governments had too many of their own immediate problems to seriously commit to political union. Even the smaller scale attempt to federate Ghana, Guinea and Mali in 1961 fell apart within months.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU)

In May 1963, the 32 heads of state of the by-then independent African nations came together in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, to form the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Falling far short of a 'United States', it was more along the lines of an African 'United Nations'. The success or otherwise of the OAU was to be determined by three fundamental principles. First, an acceptance of colonial boundaries as existing at independence; second, no (external) interference in the internal affairs of member states; and third, a commitment to help complete the decolonisation of the continent.

The OAU was a useful forum for international African cooperation, although it was frequently criticised for being little more than an ineffectual 'talking shop'. Its regular meetings of ministers and heads of state helped to generate a greater awareness of other countries' problems, but its main weakness was the fact that it had not granted itself any legal sanction to enforce its resolutions. The OAU's Liberation Committee was probably the most active organ of the

organisation through the 1970s and 80s. It provided financial support to the exiled politicians and ‘freedom fighters’ of southern Africa – Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa – especially those that gathered in Dar es Salaam as guests of President Nyerere of Tanzania. On the whole, they did not receive enough financial support to buy weapons, but enough to run an office, support exiles and promote their political cause abroad.

A noted failure of the OAU’s decolonisation record was the case of Western Sahara, a clear violation of a colonial boundary. Hesitancy and Cold War rivalry meant that the OAU failed to prevent the seizure of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania when the Spanish withdrew in 1975. War between Mauritania and Morocco saw the former being forced out in 1979, leaving Morocco in sole control of the territory, in clear violation of UN resolutions. In the early 1980s, the OAU nearly suffered a permanent split over the issue, as western-supporting African states sided with Morocco, while self-styled ‘socialist’, ‘radical’ and ‘revolutionary’ states recognised the ‘government in exile’ (in Algeria) of the Sahrawi people’s Polisario Front. As of 2018, the situation remains unresolved, with Morocco still in occupation of the territory, and exiled Polisario activists still lobbying to reclaim it.

The African Union (AU)

With the ending of the Cold War (1989–90) and break-up of the Soviet Union (1991), African states lost their strategic significance that the competing superpowers had invested in them, and thereafter world finance lost much of its former interest in African investment. African leaders were forced to recognise a harsh new reality – Africa was going to have to rely much more on its own internal resources for its future development. This meant more trade within Africa and, ultimately, greater economic integration: in other words, moves towards Nkrumah’s vision of a ‘United States of Africa’, at least, initially, in the economic sphere. In recognition of this, in June 1991, at their annual conference in the new Nigerian federal capital of Abuja, the OAU heads of government signed a treaty initiating moves towards an African Economic Community. A decade later, the OAU itself was formally converted into the African Union, launched in South Africa in July 2002 as the first step in the eventual economic and political union of the continent. Although a long way from becoming a reality, this declaration of intent was felt to be significant.

Regional groupings: ECOWAS, SADC and the EAC

Regional groupings in west, eastern and southern Africa have produced far greater signs of effective cooperation and integration, and some view these as the first steps in the eventual integration of the whole continent. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded in Lagos in 1975. This regional grouping of west Africa's 16 states was seen to be particularly significant because it cut across the artificial and disruptive barriers of Anglophone and Francophone west Africa. Wisely, ECOWAS did not try to embark on an overambitious political union, preferring to concentrate on gradually increasing regional economic cooperation, starting with transport and telecommunications and moving on to greater financial and commercial interchange.

The origins of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are to be found in a regional grouping, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference, founded at the time of Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 (the name was changed to SADC in 1994). The aim at the time was, through cooperation, to break the region's economic and communications dependence on apartheid South Africa. It had had some success in the communications field before the need to break the dependence on South Africa was dramatically lessened with the collapse of apartheid in 1990. South Africa formally joined a restructured SADC in 1994, although the region's desire not to be totally dominated by South Africa was illustrated by the decision to place the headquarters of the SADC Secretariat in the Botswana capital, Gaborone.

Figure 31.2 The OAU summit in Tripoli, August 1982, was boycotted by one-third of the African heads of state, who supported Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara. Most leaders who turned up at Tripoli saw themselves as 'radical', 'socialist' or 'revolutionary', including Robert Mugabe, prime minister of Zimbabwe (until he became executive president in 1987), seen here with the host Colonel Gaddafi. The Tripoli boycott ensured that there was no quorum and so Gaddafi could not be elected chairman of the OAU for the coming year, 1982–3.



Source: Daniel Simon/Getty Images.

The East African Community (EAC) has in many ways been the most successful of Africa's organisations for regional integration. It is much more clearly focused on the economy than either SADC or ECOWAS. Inaugurated in 2000 by Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, the EAC was joined by Rwanda and Burundi in 2007. Its long-term aim is to establish economic, political, social and cultural integration. Enthusiastically pushed forward by Uganda's President Museveni, economic integration has progressed well. It is working towards the

establishment of, first, an effective common market, then a monetary union and, finally, a political federation of its member states, although as of 2018, the chances of achieving the latter seems remote.

China and Africa

At about the same time as the African Union was being formed, China was emerging on the world economic scene as the world's fastest growing industrial economy. In 2005, China was still a minor player in Africa. Six years later, China was the continent's largest single trading partner and investor, eclipsing the former European colonial powers and the USA in both value and volume of trade and investment in Africa. For a decade, China's rapid industrial growth drew in mineral resources (especially oil and precious metals) and other raw materials from Africa on a scale of growth that exceeded even the early colonial period. There was concern in some African quarters that China was behaving like a neocolonial master. But China observed a strict policy of keeping out of local politics, happy to make deals with any African government, regardless of human rights records. Thus, where western investors hesitated to tread, such as Sudan or Zimbabwe, China moved in with massive investment.

The bilateral investment projects that China has become most involved in have been to do with transport, focusing on roads and, in particular, railways. All over the continent the railway construction boom has returned, with Chinese capital and expertise, on a scale not seen since the early years of the twentieth century. And this is not just Chinese state investment. Although many of the larger financing agreements are bilateral, government to government, most of the Chinese investment in Africa has been by private Chinese companies, investing in particular in mining. At times, their treatment of their African workforces has given rise to unease and protest, as in the Zambian Copperbelt, and whether the Chinese presence in Africa comes to be widely resented remains to be seen. It will probably depend on the success of African economic growth and employment. Since the slowdown in Chinese growth in the second half of the 2010s, the scale of Chinese investment capital in Africa and mineral extraction has likewise slowed.



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CHAPTER 32

Contemporary Africa

Democratic progress in the 1990s

To outward appearances, most of Africa was politically transformed in the early 1990s, as military dictatorships and one-party states almost universally gave way to multiparty systems of democracy. A number of factors, both internal and external, combined to bring this about. The most important external factor was the ending of the Cold War between capitalist West and communist East, as most dramatically symbolised by the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Africa was no longer a tropical playing field for global strategic power games. Corrupt and ineffective governments or longstanding dictators, such as Siad Barre of Somalia (1969–91) or Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (1965–97) were no longer supported with external funds or arms supplies simply because they declared themselves to be anti-communist or anti-capitalist.

Hitherto, with the notable exceptions of Botswana and Mauritius, no African country that had gained its independence in the 1960s had maintained a completely unbroken record of multiparty parliamentary democracy. Botswana, it could be argued, was a special case as, apart from a brief period in the 1990s, its governing political party has never seriously been challenged at the ballot box. This could be about to change, as, gearing up for the 2019 general election, Botswana's opposition parties have finally formed a loose coalition, the Umbrella for Democratic Change, that may stand a chance of defeating the incumbent Botswana Democratic Party, in power since 1966. Mauritius, on the other hand, showed great political maturity when its multi-ethnic electorate successfully replaced a longstanding government in a dramatic 'sixty seats to zero' general election in 1982, a feat repeated, in the opposite direction, in 1995. By contrast, most African heads of state, when faced with electoral defeat, had simply suspended the constitution, secure in the knowledge that they would receive external recognition and support from one side or other

in the Cold War conflict.

By the early 1990s, however, a whole new generation of Africans had reached their forties and early fifties as beneficiaries of the great educational expansion of the 1960s. They had lived their young adult lives as witnesses to the failures of successive African governments – multiparty, one-party or military dictatorship. They no longer looked back to colonial shortcomings, but instead drew on their own experience of Africa's political and economic woes. The mounting economic crisis of the 1980s added a sense of urgency. Armed with a determination to find their own solutions to Africa's problems, the much-abused African electorate decided it was time to call their governments to account. This was where the drive for the new African democracy was born. And Africa's would-be democrats drew inspiration from the release of the world's most famous political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, in February 1990. Accompanied as it was by the unbanning of political parties and the repeal of the key pieces of apartheid legislation, this sent a powerful message across the continent. If South Africa could do it, why not the rest of Africa?

Between 1990 and 1994, African governments, one after another, were dragged, sometimes kicking, to the constitutional negotiating table. It began in the People's Republic of Benin, ruled by the iron hand of Mathieu Kérékou since his seizure of power in a coup in 1972. He had abandoned Marxism in 1989 and accepted an IMF structural adjustment programme that led to severe austerity and his increasing unpopularity. In February 1990, in an attempt to quell street protests, he agreed to assemble a National Conference to discuss the future of the country. To his surprise the conference seized the initiative, declared itself the legitimate government and revised the constitution. At the multi-party elections that followed in March 1991, Kérékou was roundly defeated. Interestingly, although he stepped down, an apparently repentant Kérékou was returned to power by constitutional election in 1996 and 2001.

Benin's example set the trend and Mali followed suit. On 26 March 1991, soldiers defied orders to fire on an unarmed crowd of peaceful protestors in the Malian capital. An army officer arrested President Moussa Traoré, a constitutional conference was convened and the constitution redrafted to allow multiparty elections. Alpha Oumar Konaré was elected for the first of two terms in 1992 and for the next two decades Mali was regarded as a model of stable multiparty democracy in west Africa. In Zaire (Congo), where constitutional delegates tried the same tactic and appointed an interim prime minister, head of state Mobutu, impervious to the mounting violence he provoked, counteracted by appointing a new prime minister of his

own. This left a rapidly bankrupting state with two parallel governments, even two currencies, and no peaceful solution in sight. As we shall see below, it took rebellion supported by foreign troops to expel Mobutu from the country in 1997. In a small number of one-party states like Zambia (1991) and Malawi (1994), where Kaunda and Banda respectively had been in power since independence in 1964, the opposition remained united, and a successful change of constitution and government was achieved through the ballot box.

Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, who had come to power in Ghana (for a second time) by coup in 1981, made one of the more respectable transitions from dictatorship to democracy in 1992, being retained in power via popular vote, albeit that his victory was helped largely by divisions and weaknesses in the ranks of the opposition. In Kenya, the reluctant democrat, President Moi, managed to get himself and his party re-elected in a ballot that was widely condemned as far from 'free and fair'. His example was emulated in a number of other former one-party states where the incumbent presidents managed to strong-arm their own political party back into power in what were only nominally 'multiparty' systems.

The most spectacular failure in the democratic process was Nigeria, which, after years of preparation, suffered the ignominy of seeing its presidential election of 1993 cancelled by General Babangida just as the results were beginning to emerge and he could see the writing on the wall. Babangida was subsequently ousted by General Abacha who made it clear that he had no intention of restoring democratic rule. Nigeria was only relieved of Abacha's brutal and kleptocratic rule by his sudden death in 1998. The west African giant was finally restored to a multiparty democratic system the following year when Olusegun Obasanjo, the former military ruler (1976–9), was elected civilian president. An atmosphere of violence and distrust, however, was a feature of subsequent elections, which showed that Nigeria was far from a stable multi-party democracy. Corruption and incompetence were still a feature of both central and state governments, while the 'Islamist' banditry of Boko Haram in the northeast continued to mar the security of this vast and far from united country.

North Africa did not follow the democratic path more typical of sub-Saharan Africa after 1990. Here, the economic pressures and high levels of unemployment, partly resulting from structural adjustment programmes, prompted a religious upsurge in the two most populous and industrialised countries, Algeria and Egypt. Muslim brotherhoods and clerics vociferously rejected the 'western' principles of free-market capitalism and multiparty democracy espoused by the World Bank and IMF. They wanted nothing to do with the 'godless culture' of

‘globalisation’. They promised a fairer, less divisive, less corrupt and more morally guided society that would result from the widespread adoption of Shari’a law. As we have seen throughout this history, promises of an idealised Islamic society have been made at various times in Africa’s past, although the promised ideal rarely emerged and seldom lasted for long. On this occasion, the ‘Muslim fundamentalists’, as they were branded by their enemies, were confronted by powerful governments that had ample external backing and were able to thwart them.

The forms of democracy reborn in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s did not necessarily fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the ordinary electorate, who had yearned for a change of government that would bring in new and fresh ideas. They did, however, re-establish a basic democratic principle, which had been brushed aside too easily in the past: namely, that governments were ultimately answerable to their electorates. On the whole, the new democratic movement, whatever its limitations, opened a new era of direct African involvement in the search for African solutions. Governments acquired a new legitimacy, which, combined with the concept of greater regional economic integration, opened up whole new horizons for the continent’s long-term future. Whatever the long-term potential, however, there was no easy road to a better future, as the following section will show.

Conflict and resolution

The democratic reforms of the early 1990s did not mark an end to military coups or civil war. Among the prime sources of conflict have been ethnic distrust and regional rivalry, with central governments seen to be favouring ethnic, regional and urban élites, with religious division also at times forming part of the volatile mix. The following case histories, although not comprehensive, illustrate the main examples and show the extent that Africans have tried to intervene and resolve crises in other African countries. It should be noted, however, that not all the conflicts have found resolution.

Liberia and Sierra Leone

One of the worst zones of conflict that dominated the early 1990s was in the neighbouring west African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. But this was also the crisis that saw the beginnings of a serious Pan-African commitment to improving the lot of fellow

Africans. In December 1989, self-imposed exile and Liberian dissident Charles Taylor invaded Liberia from neighbouring Guinea with the aim of overthrowing the brutal military dictatorship of President Samuel Doe, a former Master Sergeant who had promoted himself to General on seizing power. Taylor was assisted by Sierra Leonean dissidents who hoped that Liberia under a victorious Taylor would in turn help them overthrow President Momoh's corrupt government in Sierra Leone.

In August 1990, with the Liberian capital Monrovia about to fall to two rival rebel forces, the regional grouping ECOWAS (see [Chapter 31](#)) sent in an armed peacekeeping force, known as ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group), to try and end the conflict. In agreeing to this intervention, west African heads of state abandoned the old OAU principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and established a critically important precedent. It marked the beginning of a wider African commitment to interventionist conflict resolution, which they were later to extend further to the protection of democratic rule. ECOMOG initially played a passive role, to the extent of turning a blind eye to the capture, torture and execution of President Samuel Doe. As the country descended into civil war, ECOMOG eventually went on the military offensive, forcing Charles Taylor to the negotiating table in 1992. The conflict was far from over, and Liberia suffered five further years of failed 'ceasefires', before Taylor was finally elected president by an exhausted electorate.

West African zones of conflict, 1990–2011



Meanwhile, conflict had broken out in Sierra Leone where Taylor provided weaponry to the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in exchange for diamonds. This was where the term ‘blood diamonds’ first came from. Through two coups, separated by a brief period of elected government, the Sierra Leone rebellion continued unabated, with the rebels capturing Freetown in 1998. At this point, ECOMOG stepped in and expelled the rebels from the capital, allowing the elected leader Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to return from his temporary exile and resume the presidency. An attempt to end the conflict by bringing the RUF leader Foday Sankoh into government failed and, in 1999, ECOMOG went on the offensive, assisted by a small British contingent who provided military training to the Sierra Leone army. Sankoh was captured and subsequently died in prison, and a ceasefire agreed in the Nigerian capital Abuja in November 1990 was the beginning of the end of the conflict. President Kabbah was re-elected in 2002 and a Special Court was set up to try war criminals. Among those indicted was President Charles Taylor of Liberia for crimes committed in instigating the RUF rebellion in Sierra Leone.

Meanwhile, Taylor was also under pressure from rebellion in his own country and, in 2003, he was forced into exile in Nigeria. Under international pressure, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo showed that there was to be no safe haven for African dictators, who would be answerable for their crimes. He allowed Taylor to be arrested and transferred to the Sierra Leone Special Court, which was sitting in The Hague in the Netherlands, it being considered politically too

dangerous to try him in Sierra Leone itself. In 2012, Taylor was found guilty on eleven charges, including acts of terror, murder and rape. He was sentenced to 50 years' imprisonment. Sierra Leone did not want to risk holding him in prison, so, initially, he was held in the Netherlands before being transferred to the United Kingdom to serve out his sentence.

Rwanda

The euphoria that accompanied the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first freely elected president of South Africa filled Africa and Africa watchers with great hope for the continent. Within just four weeks that hope was to be shattered by the outbreak of the worst mass killing in the history of the continent. Most people outside Africa, and many within it, had never heard of Rwanda, but they did now, and it came with the word 'genocide'.

A group of Tutsi exiles, whose parents had fled the Hutu-initiated massacres of 1959–60 (see [Chapter 28](#)), formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) under the leadership of Paul Kagame and invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990–1. By 1993, they had gained control of a large part of the north and west of the country and forced the Hutu dictator Juvénal Habyarimana to the negotiating table in Tanzania. A ceasefire was agreed and a resolution of the conflict was in sight. Meanwhile, Hutu militias, going by the name *Interahamwe* ('those who stand together'), had undergone secret political indoctrination that primed them for a 'final solution' – to launch a genocide against all Tutsi in Rwanda and any Hutu 'traitors' who opposed their plans. In their eyes, this included Habyarimana and most of his cabinet, because they were prepared to talk peace and even share government with the *inyenzi* ('cockroaches') of the Tutsi RPF.

The shooting down of Habyarimana's plane as it approached Kigali airport on 6 April 1994 was the signal for the genocide to commence. Within hours, the main political figures in Habyarimana's government were killed and the killing of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi civilians and their Hutu sympathisers commenced. At a chilling rate, over 100 days an estimated 800,000 Tutsi were killed, many by machete, by their known neighbours, often herded into churches where they received little or no protection from the clergy, some of whom even sided with the genocidaires.

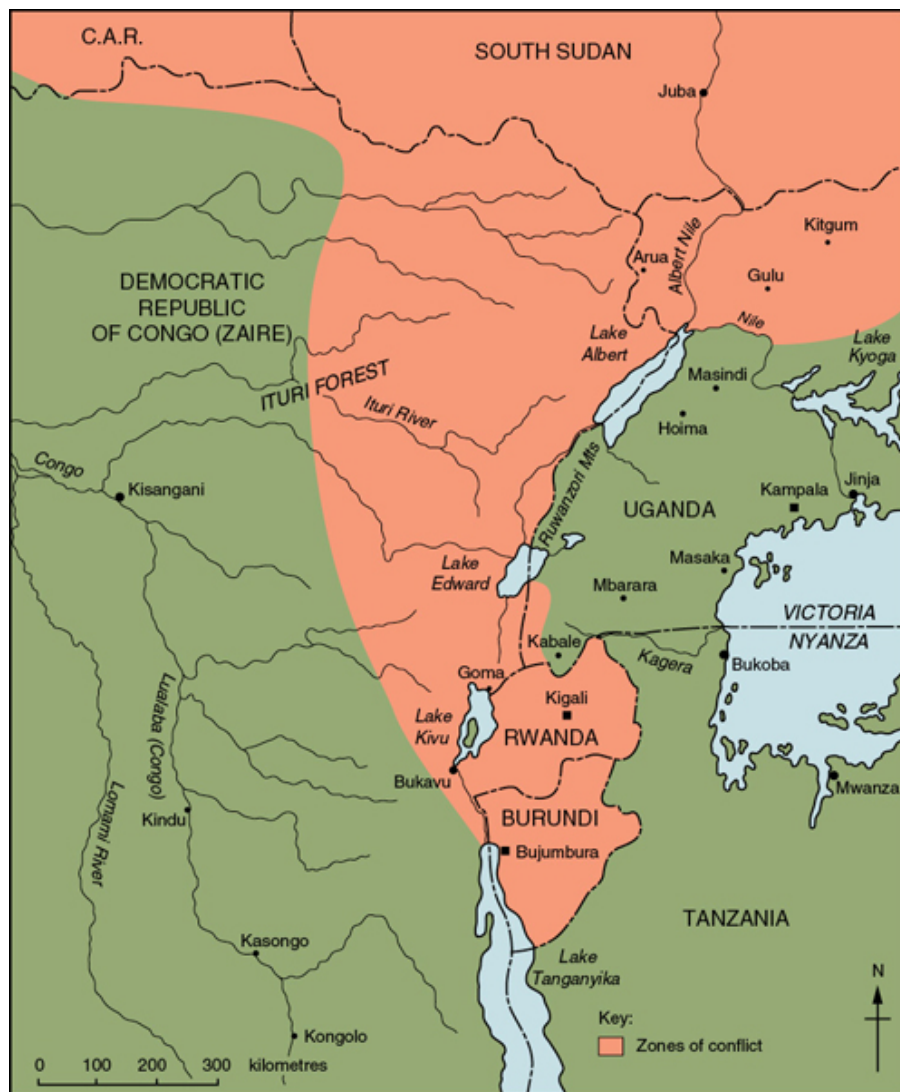
The USA, having been bloodied in Somalia when two of its helicopters were brought down in Mogadishu the previous year, chose to do nothing but debate whether this constituted 'genocide'. The UN had a small peacekeeping force in the country to monitor the ceasefire

between the government and the RPF, but preventing organised civil genocide was not part of its remit and it protested that it had neither the legal nor the military power to stop the genocide. It was not ended until the RPF, who had restarted the war on 8 April as soon as it became apparent what was happening, seized the capital in July. The *Interahamwe* fled west into Zaire, taking some 2 million Hutu civilians with them for protective cover. The French, who had supported the Habyarimana regime and even provided some training to the *Interahamwe*, granted the westward exodus the umbrella protection of a French 'intervention' force. This gave the dangerously erroneous impression to many international aid and news agencies that the Rwandans fleeing into Zaire were escaping from the genocide, rather than sheltering the perpetrators. The exodus into Zaire allowed the *Interahamwe* and remnants of the Hutu army to regroup and provide an ongoing threat to the security of the RPF government in Rwanda. Since 1994, the RPF government has achieved high rates of economic growth and impressive levels of reconciliation, although President Paul Kagame has shown autocratic tendencies that may not bode well for long-term political stability.

Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo

In 1995, the RPF army invaded Zaire, forcing most of the Hutu civilians back into Rwanda, but they still felt threatened by the remnants of the *Interahamwe* who remained behind. The following year, the RPF seized the opportunity of a rebellion in eastern Zaire to invade the country and this time provided the military force to march across the country and overthrow Mobutu himself, installing an old Congo dissident, Laurent Kabila, as president of the renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo. Unfortunately, there was nothing democratic about it. The Rwandan president soon lost faith in Kabila and, in 1998, he and Uganda's President Museveni sent their armies into the Congo in support of rebels in the east of the country. There is clear evidence that these foreign occupying armies were not only protecting their own security, but also helping themselves to some of the region's mineral resources. The conflict degenerated into a regional war that devastated the eastern Congo and even brought in the army of Zimbabwe in search of lucrative mineral deals. By the time the war officially ended in 2003, over 1 million Congolese had died, and lasting peace, stability and recovery remained little more than a hope. A low-level conflict among bandits, militias and an ill-disciplined Congolese army rumbled on, fuelled by the mineral wealth in the region.

East-central Africa, 1990–2017



Somalia

In Somalia, the vacuum created by the departure of Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 had opened the way for clan-based militias to effectively destroy the nation-state. In May 1991, the northern region (former British Somaliland) seceded as the independent 'Republic of Somaliland', but it failed to gain international recognition. The remainder of Somalia disintegrated into ten or more clan-controlled

territories, largely under the rule of 'war lords' and ill-disciplined militias. For a while in the early 2000s, local religious leaders established some semblance of stability in an attempt to take the guns off the streets. As they gained control over more areas, they came together to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). This, however, was taking place in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York.

Through the prism of President George W. Bush's subsequent 'war on terror', Somalia was suspected of harbouring 'Islamic terrorists'. Consequently, in December 2006, the USA instigated an invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia. The aim was to establish a Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that would bring stability to Somalia and root out Islamic extremism from the country. The invasion effected the opposite; it radicalised members of the ICU and led to the founding of *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* ('Movement of the Warrior Youth'), popularly known as 'al-Shabaab'. As Ethiopia withdrew, the African Union became involved in support of the TFG, sending in an armed peacekeeping force, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Al-Shabaab, however, was not easily cowed and it soon became clear that the TFG 'government' could only survive with outside support, and it was not long before AMISOM was involved in direct armed conflict with al-Shabaab in the streets of Mogadishu. The war has dragged on through various attempts to establish a viable federal government and interventions by various agencies of the UN and the African Union. With drought and food shortages critical since 2009, thousands of starving Somali refugees have fled into Kenya to create the largest refugee camp in the world. At the time of writing in 2018, African conflict resolution in Somalia is still a work in progress.

South Sudan

In 2011, the people of southern Sudan voted overwhelmingly by referendum to break from the northern two-thirds of the Republic of Sudan. By prior agreement with the north, Africa's newest state, South Sudan, was born on 9 July 2011. Hopes were high that this would bring an end to the long tale of conflict in the region. Those hopes, however, have been severely dashed.

The two territories of northern and southern Sudan, under British colonial rule until 1956, had only been united into one country a decade before independence and the union did not go well from the start. Indeed, civil war was to become a dominant feature of Sudan's history for all but one of its 55 years of independence up to the separation of 2011. Traditionally portrayed as a war between Arab/

Muslim north and African/Christian or traditional-religion south, the reality was several interconnecting and conflicting civil wars devastating Sudan, particularly from the 1980s. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) dominated the southern struggle for independence from the north. But there were numerous other groups in rebellion against the central government, and these included both southern and northern Muslims. For its part, the Khartoum government has generally been dominated by northerners who see themselves ethnically as part of the Arab Muslim world.

The south was rich in natural resources, including water and fertile soil – both in short supply in the north – and in the late twentieth century oil was added to the mix in the form of huge reserves that were discovered just south of the traditional administrative north-south boundary. This provided the impetus for successive Khartoum governments to maintain and strengthen their control of the south. An oil pipeline was built to transport the oil to the northern Red Sea port of Port Sudan, giving the north control of the south's oil. Attempts there to implement Shari'a law, however, only made the south more determined to separate from the north.

From the late 1990s, the Khartoum government attempted to isolate the SPLA by making overtures towards the Nuer-based South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF), which dominated the struggle in the region of the oil fields. This strengthened distrust and animosity between the Dinka, who dominated the SPLA, and the Nuer, which stored up problems for the future. (The Nuer and the Dinka are ethnically related agri-pastoral peoples who have a long history of territorial rivalry in the middle Nile valley, even during the liberation war against the Khartoum government.) Meanwhile, rebel groups in Darfur realised they were being excluded from the tentative negotiations that were going on between the SPLA and the Khartoum government. But as they stepped up their rebellion in Darfur through 2004, the government unleashed its 'Arab' nomad militias, known as the Janjaweed. Backed by government air attacks, the Janjaweed wreaked havoc in the western region of north Darfur, taking the opportunity to 'ethnically cleanse' rival Muslim 'African' pastoralists from their traditional grazing lands. While international eyes were focused on the real prospects of peace between central government and the SPLA, up to 1 million people were displaced in the west, with 100,000 of them fleeing into neighbouring Chad.



With African governments of the region heavily involved, in the early months of 2004 an accord between Khartoum and the SPLA was brokered by the Kenyans. This set out a political framework for peace, and in January 2005 the SPLA leader John Garang became vice-president of a six-year transitional ‘power-sharing’ government. At the end of this period, there was to be a referendum on independence for the south. Garang died shortly afterwards in a helicopter accident, but the power-sharing agreement survived the shock. When, in 2011, the south voted almost unanimously for separation from the north, there were some armed clashes over disputed territory in the border area. But the Khartoum government did not halt the process leading to

independence, as many had feared.

It seemed that the main outstanding issues were over financial arrangements between the two countries, in particular concerning oil and its transportation. But then, in 2013, just two years after independence, a political power struggle between the Dinka President Salva Kiir and his Nuer Vice-President Riek Machar gave way to incidents of fighting between Dinka and Nuer. Machar had a history of manipulating ethnicity in previous political power struggles and now generations of distrust came to the fore as the fighting quickly degenerated into all-out civil war.

Over the ensuing years, at least 300,000 people have been killed and up to 3 million displaced. Fighting in the agricultural south has led to severe food shortages that have left millions facing starvation. By 2015, South Sudan was registered highest on the international Fragile States Index. Ugandan troops were drawn into the conflict in support of the government forces and a UN peacekeeping force has been deployed. But a peace agreement signed in Ethiopia in 2015 lasted barely a year. Along with Somalia, second on the Fragile States Index, South Sudan remains an intractable African problem that has not yet reached resolution.

The 'Arab spring'

North Africa had a brief flirtation with 'people power' in the so-called 'Arab spring' of 2011. It was sparked off in Tunisia. Despite high levels of unemployment, the weakness and divisions of the Tunisian political opposition had enabled President Ben Ali to win successive contested elections. However, the oppressive nature of the Tunisian state, which is often a feature of long-serving governments, added to the tension that had been heightened by the rapidly rising food and fuel prices triggered by the world financial crisis of 2008.

State oppression was symbolised by the abuse meted out by police to a young Tunisian fruit seller named Mohamed Bouazizi, whom they beat up for trading without a licence. In despair, Bouazizi burned himself to death on 17 December 2010. Tunisians spontaneously took to the streets in protest at the wanton police brutality that drove Bouazizi to his desperate gesture. Simmering resentment of the government and security forces by the general populace quickly spiralled beyond state control as mass demonstrations called for President Ben Ali to step down. On 14 January 2011, in the face of mass public protest, Ben Ali stepped down and went into exile.

It was the Arab world's 'Berlin Wall' moment as the Tunisian people's achievement inspired similar mass protests in Egypt and

elsewhere in the Arab Muslim world.

Egypt was a classic case. President Mubarak, a former military officer, had maintained an authoritarian regime. Although in theory a multiparty electoral system, Mubarak was intolerant of most political opposition, the press was heavily censored and political and personal freedom was curtailed. Heavily supported by US aid, and World Bank and IMF loans, the Mubarak government had followed the structural adjustment policies that his creditors preferred, cutting food subsidies and reducing general government expenditure. The result was a lowering of living standards, even among the huge, salaried civil service and professional classes. Only a small minority of entrepreneurs and their political supporters seemed to thrive in these conditions. With well over 50 per cent of the 70 million population living in urban areas, two-thirds of them in greater Cairo, there was a huge underclass of urban unemployed who had fled the rural areas only to find greater poverty in urban slums.

The Egyptian populace saw their opportunity for freedom in the Tunisian example of January 2011, and Tahrir Square in central Cairo quickly became the focus for widespread protest. There was no central leadership as such for Mubarak's security apparatus to attack, and within a remarkably short four weeks, Mubarak was forced to step down on 11 February 2011. The military took over with a promise of constitutional reform. In due course, elections were held and won overwhelmingly by the Muslim Brotherhood who had until this moment opposed elections. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi took office in June 2012 amid fears that his government would impose strict Islamic law. A year later the military seized power and purged the Muslim Brotherhood with mass trials and imprisonment. In 2014, under a revised constitution, Abdel el-Sisi, former head of the armed forces, was elected civilian president, in effect returning Egypt to the sort of government that had been led by Mubarak. Four years later, he was re-elected, having imprisoned or barred most of his opponents from standing against him.

Following the fall of Mubarak, popular protests started in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. Gaddafi appeared to be taken by surprise, but when the protests clearly would not go away, he unleashed the full power of the military against the Libyan people in Benghazi. Western powers, who had long desired regime change in Libya, persuaded the UN to allow NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), to establish a 'no-fly' zone over Libya, supposedly to protect the civilians of Benghazi. With the USA not wanting to become too embroiled in yet another unwinnable war, France and Britain were soon interpreting the UN resolution as clearance to attack all Libyan

military installations in what was clearly an attempt to force Gaddafi out of power. With the assistance of NATO, irregular forces were able to take Tripoli and finally, in October 2011, Gaddafi's home town of Sirte, where Gaddafi himself was captured and summarily killed. Libya degenerated into a fractured and anarchic state, with an uncontrolled re-emergence of slave trading and people trafficking across the Mediterranean, leaving the way open for Islamist extremist groups to establish a presence. Meanwhile, Gaddafi-supporting Islamists retreated to the south, adding to already existing tensions and conflicts on the southern fringes of the Sahara.

Only in Tunisia did some form of democratically accountable government emerge from the ashes of the 'Arab spring'.

Mali

Mali's two decades of political stability received a rude interruption in January 2012 when Tuareg rebels took control of much of the north of Mali, including the historic city of Timbuktu, and declared the region to be the separate Tuareg state of 'Azawad'. Within a very short time, and following the retreat south of Islamists from north Africa, 'al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' (AQIM) and another Islamist group seized control of 'Azawad' from the Tuareg and pledged to extend Shari'a law to the whole of Mali. They began destroying religious shrines in Timbuktu and threatened the city's medieval library. However, one very brave local man managed to hide and spirit out of the city most of the priceless historic manuscripts and books and so saved them from destruction.

Meanwhile, in March, Amadou Sanogo, a middle-ranking army officer, overthrew Mali's democratically elected government, claiming the failed war against the northern rebels as his excuse. West African leaders, however, showed their commitment to democratic government. They had had enough of coups, and ECOWAS imposed sanctions and a trade embargo on the country. Within a month, Sanogo had accepted an interim civilian government and elections within a year. In January 2013, the interim government invited in French help to crush the rebels and by February Timbuktu was liberated and most of the north had been recaptured. Elected democratic government was restored that September when Ibrahim Keita was sworn in as the new president.

Health and environment

The two greatest health hazards in tropical Africa have been historically, and remain, malaria and a shortage of clean potable water. The distribution of mosquito nets has helped reduce child exposure to malaria in some stable countries and big strides have likewise been made in providing wider access to clean drinking water. But many governments, under severe budgetary restraints, have reduced health spending per head of population from its big expansion in the 1960s and early 1970s. The biggest health problems, however, have occurred in conflict zones, where aside from deliberate killings, maiming and rape, health services have been among the first to suffer in times of rebellion and civil war. It was no coincidence that the Ebola outbreak that started in Guinea in December 2013 quickly became a major regional two-year pandemic, taking in Liberia and Sierra Leone, those very countries whose infrastructures (health provision included) had been devastated by civil war in the recent past. By contrast, cases of Ebola infection in Nigeria, Mali and Senegal in the same period were quickly contained. It is interesting to note that the pandemic that has attracted the greatest international attention and assistance was one which also occurred in the industrialised world – HIV/AIDS – although it has, in fact, been Africa that has suffered the greatest rate of worldwide infection.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic

From the mid-1980s, Africa's youthful population was particularly hard hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The initial trouble was that this new sexually transmitted disease was widespread in the heterosexual population of central and eastern Africa before the disease was even recognised. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, it spread devastatingly through much of central, eastern and southern Africa – often carried initially by migrant workers and long-distance transport drivers. Many governments refused to recognise the seriousness of the crisis, remaining in denial as infection rates rose rapidly. This was partly a result of private sexual behaviour being a cultural taboo subject for discussion in most African societies. Furthermore, AIDS was to some extent viewed as a Western disease of male homosexuality – another taboo subject in most of Africa – and this further increased people's reluctance to discuss the reality of the disease or have themselves tested and diagnosed.

South Africa, with very high rates of infection, was particularly slow at recognising and admitting the crisis. In the absence of a vaccine, new drugs were developed in the industrial West to suppress the virus, but they were too expensive for African health budgets.

Some progressive governments, therefore, focused on preventive programmes of public health education. The latter was developed effectively in Uganda where infection rates had begun to drop by the late 1990s. Some sceptics believed that this was because infected people were dying and were thus falling away from the statistics. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that public health education did play a positive role in raising people's awareness that it was a preventable infection and rates of new infection began to fall elsewhere. As [Figure 32.1](#) shows, Botswana, with particularly high rates of infection in the mid-1990s, followed Uganda's example and embarked on a proactive campaign of public health information and peer education to combat the disease. Nevertheless, the virus had by then cut a swathe through the generation that had grown to maturity since independence and on whose shoulders so much of the hope for the future had been placed.

Figure 32.1 A health education poster in Botswana, 1997. Following the relative success of Uganda's example, Botswana (with one of the continent's best infrastructures for health clinics, schools, clean water and political stability) has embarked on a proactive campaign of public information and peer education to combat the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.



Source: Yoav Lemmer/AFP/Getty Images.

Since the turn of the millennium, the price of drugs to suppress (but not as yet cure) the virus has been brought down and a number of countries have been able to make these drugs available to some of their infected population, focusing particularly on pregnant women to prevent the spread of the virus to the next generation. These,

however, have been the more fortunate, stable countries, such as Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and Senegal. Others, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, plagued by widespread warfare and mass rape, and with little effective infrastructure, are likely to continue to be devastated by the pandemic for many years to come.

Climate change

Since the 1950s, there has been a slight but noticeable fall in the average annual rainfall in many parts of the continent. Recent scientific research has revealed strong evidence for a slight warming in the average temperature of the world's oceans, combined with a dramatic increase in the summer melt of the polar ice caps, adding large volumes of fresh water to the oceans. This, in turn, affects ocean currents and with it rainfall, adding to general world climatic change. The net result for Africa has been an increasing incidence of extreme oscillation between drought and flood, especially in the Sahelian and savannah zones of seasonal rainfall. Added to the disruptive effects of drought have been those of civil war in some of the worst affected areas: Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.

That drought does not necessarily lead to famine is illustrated by the case of Botswana. Perched as it is on the edge of the Kalahari Desert, Botswana regularly faces years of drought, just as badly as anywhere else. But Botswana has had a stable economy based on cattle and the export of diamonds and it has had a stable political democracy. It has thus been able to use its well-developed infrastructure and its economic reserves to establish effective drought relief projects and thus ensure that although people suffer from the drought, starvation is averted and the country holds together.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, it is clear that the incidence of drought in much of Africa is worsening. A slight warming of the Indian Ocean has triggered westward currents to draw rain-bearing clouds away from eastern Africa, leading to severe drought conditions, and bringing war-torn Somalia in particular to the verge of widespread famine.

As early chapters of this history have revealed, in the historic past Africans coped with climatic changes by evolving new pastoral and agricultural techniques for coming to terms with their environment. But in those days, population levels were a fraction of what they are today. Aside from the levels of devastation caused by modern warfare, today's climate change and its increasing incidence of drought and flood are happening in a very different world. Restrictions of modern

boundaries and rapid population growth, combined with higher expectations of standards of living, are making ever greater demands on the environment. There is a growing awareness among African governments of the need to devise their own locally evolved solutions to their countries' problems. Whether these local solutions can keep up with the increasing volatility of global weather patterns is another matter.

Figure 32.2 The 'youth group' of Dlaba on their community-owned field hoeing the soil between millet plants by hand, accompanied by live music.



Source: IFAD/Horst Wagner

Political stability and contemporary Africa

Many African countries in the second decade of the twenty-first century have recorded annual rates of economic growth that the developed world could only dream of – between 4 and 7 per cent for more than half the nations on the continent. A significant contribution to this growth are remittances from the African diaspora. Africa has lost many of its well-educated citizens, who have used that good education to advance careers for themselves abroad. They often left when their country of origin was in political or economic crisis, but on

the whole they have not forgotten their roots. Most send money back home to family and emerging businesses. The total sums involved are huge: the remittances of Senegal's diaspora, for instance, amount to 10 per cent of the country's GDP. And in a country where 50 per cent of the adult population are not in full-time paying work, this is a really significant contribution to the economic welfare of the Senegalese population.

Although still subject to the volatility of world commodity prices, the key to success in terms of growth is clearly political stability, which, in the long term, means good governance rather than dictatorship.

Despite the many false starts that accompanied the democratic revival of the 1990s, positive progress on the political front continues to consolidate. As with the struggle for independence, Ghana has, to a large extent, led the way. Rawlings stood down after his second four-year term in 2000, and his political opponents won the ensuing presidential and general elections. Since then, a pattern has emerged in Ghana with a change of government after each of the two terms allowed by the constitution. This has had an enormous impact in terms of political stability, not just in Ghana, but throughout the region. There are no longer automatic cries of 'fraud' by every losing candidate as they know their time can come again. There is a realisation now in an increasing number of African countries that, while elections provide the legal framework, it is respect for human rights, free speech and a free press (boosted by social media) that make a democracy and provide stable government. In this respect, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2011 and Liberian president, who stepped down in 2017, has done an incredible job in restoring her shattered country to some degree of political and economic normality.

There remains a worrying trend of some presidents attempting to outstay their allotted two terms by changing the constitution. The presidents of Congo-Brazzaville and Rwanda legislated themselves into more than two terms, while Yoweri Museveni of Uganda is currently well into his fourth decade in power. However, his democratic credentials have been severely tarnished by autocratic tendencies: his suppression of media freedoms, his intolerance of peaceful protest and the arrest of opposition politicians. In December 2017, the Ugandan parliament passed a bill that would potentially allow Museveni to remain in office until 2034. Meanwhile, President Joseph Kabila of the ironically named Democratic Republic of the Congo indefinitely delayed elections when his constitutional terms ended in 2016. King Mswati III of 'Swaziland' has justified his retention of absolute power

by claiming loyalty to African culture, and renamed his country eSwatini by royal decree on 15 April 2018.

In The Gambia, on the other hand, west African politicians showed their mettle when the long-term autocratic President Yahya Jammeh refused to step down following his defeat in the election of December 2016. They threatened to call in ECOWAS troops to force the issue. Jammeh agreed to step down and leave the country, allowing his successor, Adama Barrow, who had been sworn in at The Gambian embassy in Senegal, to return to The Gambia in triumph.

The formal union of Africa may still be a long way off. But perhaps more important even than formal union, African leaders have shown by their actions since the 1990s that they are determined and prepared to help establish and protect stable democratic rule across the continent, because it is only with stable government, answerable to the people, that there is any hope of real economic and social benefit for the mass of the African population.



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Suggestions for further reading

A list of general histories, regional surveys, general historical themes and journals can be found on *History of Africa's* companion website, www.macmillanihe.com/shillington-hoa-4e.

More detailed works on specific themes and periods are listed here, according to the sections in which the chapters are grouped.

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